

PRO PATRIA



"I lay closer still to the earth, and waited for the end." (Page 108)

Pro Patria

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PRO PATRIÂ

By Max Pemberton

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OF THE HILLS" "THE IRON
PIRATE" ETC

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τείχη οὐ πόλις, οὐδὲ νῆες ἀνδρῶν κεναί

TO MY FRIEND
DR. W. ROBERTSON NICOLL
THIS BOOK IS GRATEFULLY
INSCRIBED

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Editor's Foreword

AT Abbazia, upon the shores of the Bay of Quarnero, I first heard this story from the lips of the man who wrought that it might be told. As he wrote it at my solicitation, so for the most part is it written here. No longer a whispered tale for the chief priests of bureaucracy, some knowledge of it at least has passed from the council-chamber to the market-place; and there are many who "would an they could," yet do not for lack of surer ground. One man alone is able to speak; and he has spoken in these pages. That the whole nature of the momentous events he relates will, hereafter, be understood by his fellow-countrymen, it would be presumption to hope. The Englishman is slow to admit the graver perils in which circumstances might place his country and his home. The unchanging ramparts of sea and shore are for him a surer fact than all the armies of the nations. From the cliffs of Dover he looks down upon his "goodly heritage"; in the shadow of the "coastwise lights of England" he finds his hope. Should one approach him to say, "The day is at hand when these ramparts shall not avail, when the lights shall shine no more," he would give no hearing to so bold a

preacher. The old complacency would remain undisturbed, the unshaken belief in the girdle of the waters which, for a thousand years, has stood sentinel to the homes of England, and will so stand until the end.

"Three ways I know," said the great Moltke, "of getting into your country, but I have yet to discover a way of getting out."

If Alfred Hilliard's story suggests any thought to us, it may well be this—"Is the truth of the national security the same in our day as it was when the first of the Germans wrote? Is it the dreamer alone who may tell himself that the national creed is built upon a false faith, upon false premises and tacit ignorance? Is it the dreamer alone who, in his dreams, may see the sword at England's gate and the enemy in her homes?"

These questions one man's devotion has helped us to answer. A simple soldier, stumbling blindly upon the heart of the nation's peril, of such I write. The work which he was called upon to do, a thousand hands would do again if England's need should seek them; yet not more courageously could it be done, nor with greater love of fatherland, all sufficient and all sacrificing. He wrought for his country's sake, and of him his friends may say, as the greatest of the Englishmen said for Cominius—

"I do love

My country's good with a respect more tender,
More holy, and profound, than mine own life,
My dear wife's estimate."

BOOK I
THE MAN

CHAPTER I

The Beginning of Alfred Hilliard's Story, and Incidentally of Two Men upon the Road to Calais

MY story, I am to tell it, you say? The hand is the hand of Damon; but whence comes the counsel? Others, and they are many, have been before me wherever the tongue of the gossip is heard. The momentous events of these later months—events, which yet can put a hush upon my life—have been the theme of every tattler to tickle the ears of the credulous and to make strong the boaster. For the pleasure of undoing such as these, I must speak, men tell me. No longer do my superiors forbid; no longer am I, as a soldier, compelled to silence. The reasons are good, but I stand to a better. If I speak, it shall be as an Englishman, even the least of my country's servants. That which I did, ten thousand would do to-morrow if the call were theirs. But mine was the lot; and as it befell so let the record go.

I am to tell my story, but it is to be built upon no ancient models. There is to be no "dear reader" in it, nor any horsemen coming down a hill. Let my

friends forgive me, if I break faith with them, here at the outset; for who should come galloping towards Saint Pierre as I write these very lines but Harry Fordham, the parson of Cottesbrook, in good Northamptonshire, and how should he gallop if not upon a horse? In imagination I see him, it is true, for a thousand miles, or more if you wish it, lie between this sunny bay of Abbazia and the old town of Calais, whereto he rode upon that good day of June; which remains in my memory as any landmark of my childhood, or greater day which men may not forget. And of Harry shall my first word be, though all the canons of the arts are thereby broken, and every reader that would follow me quits the loitering caravan upon the threshold of the pilgrimage.

“Halloa, Sir Knight! halloa, halloa! And where, in Heaven’s name, did you get that stink-pot from?”

There are some men from whom you take insult meekly. Harry Fordham is one of them. Let him cast ashes upon your ancestors, and your own handkerchief dusts the pictures. God never intended him to be a parson, he says. I would write it down that no truer servant of religion ever wore white choker (though, to be sure, he is given to stocks when he hunts in winter).

“‘Stink-pot,’ my dear Harry, is a vulgar term. Behold a brand new Panhard, delivered an hour ago from the city of Paris. It cost a thousand, please to remember. Respect Her Majesty’s coinage, if you have none for me.”

He reined in an impatient horse and looked my new automobile up and down contemptuously.

"The Lord be good to you for coming to a thing like that—you that have ridden horses. Why, they must smell it in Calais, and that's a mile away. Captain Alfred Hilliard, you are on the broad and easy road. Thank your stars for it."

I told him to have done with it and not to display his ignorance.

"Come, now, you were never on a motor-car in your life?"

"I have too much respect for the Cloth."

"Which, in your case, is a check suit they can see at Dover."

He looked down at his amazing coat, and the twinkle of his keen eyes was a thing to see.

"The Church must set an example. Besides, where shall the loud lyre be heard if not in France. I want to know about the car."

"Come aboard, and I will haste thy manual to be. Seriously, it's a pretty car?"

"The proud kettle rejoicing in Day and Martin. I admit that it has points above other kettles. Be kind to my widow and children and I will listen to you. Is the horse to come, too?"

"Summon that aged impostor at the inn-door yonder, and let him hear some Winchester French. He seems to want a tonic."

He hailed the fellow in a voice that would have moved a Margate hoy, and having wasted a good deal of breath in such plain injunctions as "*Menez*

le cheval à l'écurie," "*prenez-garde,*" "*je te donnerai un franc,*" he crossed the road and seated himself at my side.

"To the bureau of the nearest asylum, *allons donc, cher Alfred.* I am all for a speedy death, 'something lingering, with boiling oil in it.' Cover me up and let her rip, as Homer says."

"I will run you into Boulogne under the hour, and bring you back with a new faith. People who abuse motors belong to a past generation—a race that tabooed the steam-engine for the sake of the horse-breeder. Ten years hence they will be in sackcloth, which is not so becoming as an Irish homespun, let me tell you. Admit that the sensation is a new thing in your life."

"I admit everything to the man with the club. The thing certainly seems respectable. I apologise to its odorous qualities. *Omnes sibi melle melius esse quam alteri.* The stink is left upon the road behind us, for the benefit of posterity, as it were."

"There is little or none when we are moving, no vibration, no jar, you see. A good car always reminds me of a gondola. You go and don't know why you go."

"Until you run into a handy ditch and are better informed. Instruct my ignorance, what speed are we travelling now?"

"Twenty-one and an eighth miles an hour. Down the hill yonder I will promise you thirty-five miles an hour."

"And I am an orphan. *Nullus est locus domestica*

sede jucundior. Cicero anticipated this, my Alfred. Be a little merciful."

"Do you remember the archdeacon who was asked to say prayers because the ship was sinking, and who cried, 'Great Heaven! has it come to that?' You remind me of him. But I am going to slacken speed, Harry. We are now running nine miles an hour. Take courage and regard the prospect."

It is cruelty to animals to drive an automobile at her best when you have one *in statu pupillari* aboard. While I knew Harry Fordham would have cried "Bravo!" even had we gone at a hundred miles an hour, I slackened speed through the village of La Chaussée, and permitted him, as we mounted the hill beyond, to enjoy the superb prospect of the downs and the odd little town of Calais behind us, and even the white cliffs of our own country across the laughing sea. One of the packet-boats was making Calais Harbour then; a fleet of smacks, its brown sails close hauled, drifted rather than sailed upon that sparkling field of blue. Out in mid-channel a great liner steamed for Thames and home in an atmosphere gloriously clear and vivifying. The blue waters were spread out as though at our very feet. A fisherman's cottage upon the cliff had the aspect of a doll's house built into some picture which a great theatre disclosed. A man lived on such a day. Nevertheless, for my part, I can never look to the white cliffs of Kent without a sickness for my home; and so it was upon that morning, when, as a so-called invalid and certainly an idler, I turned my eyes to

Dover town and the green heights of England beyond.

"Why are we in Calais, Harry, when we might be in London?" I asked him, for the scene had stilled his tongue, too. "Do you know that the London season is now in full swing—*vide* the society papers? Think of all the pretty women in Hyde Park this very day—Ranelagh, Prince's, suppers at the Carlton, the clack of tongues, and 'Music, with her voluptuous swell.' Are you unmoved?"

"As a rock. I would not change a boat of all that fishing-fleet for the house with the statues on it in Park Lane. Consider me impossible—and tell me where we lunch."

"At the first decent hotel in Boulogne. That windmill over there marks the village of Marquise. It is seven miles from there to the town, and you shall do it in half an hour."

"For these and all mercies—— By the way, do you dine with Lepeletier to-night? But of course you do; where else should you dine?"

I suppose that my face betrayed me; for presently he laughed and slapped me on the shoulder.

"We blush: all is safe!" he cried merrily. "Why are we in Calais, old Alfred? Why, to dine with Lepeletier and his daughter."

I turned it with a question.

"Are you dining there?"

"Be calm. I am, sir. I shall even presume to take the exquisite Agnes in to dinner. Ha, ha! all is discovered, my Alfred. Fly at once."

I said nothing, for what can a man say at such times? After all, the story must come out some time, and why not then? Surely I knew no one to whom I would tell it so freely as to Harry Fordham, the largest-hearted man that ever preached the gospel of humanity. He, meanwhile, flew off at a tangent.

"I like Lepeletier—a French gentleman, a *rara avis* nowadays. It seems odd that such a man should be sent to Calais, of all places, because the Government has taken it into its head to dig a coal-pit, or something. But it must be more than that, for when I rode over to the works the other day, a sentry came out of a box and struck an attitude which would have done credit to Ajax and the lightning. I explained that I agreed with him entirely and turned my horse. I am sorry to have missed the pith of an excellent oration. He really was very angry for such a small man."

"You mean the sea-works over yonder at Escalles? I've often thought of it. The official story is a Government survey for new protective harbour works and coal borings. Why should they be so secret about it? It's always the way in France. They show the foreigner the sentry's bayonet. We show him everything and give him a glass of sherry afterwards. It's the English confidence, I suppose."

"And a good old-fashioned confidence, too. I like the open door. If you are going to knock a man down for his sins, always do it in a gentlemanly way. The skeleton in the cupboard is but a

collection of bones when you dump him down outside. I preach that from the pulpit—light and not darkness. You cannot tell an honest man from a rogue until the sun is turned on. Get them out into the daylight, and you teach them to see.”

“Fine maxims—I can take more of them when that fellow over there has done with his horse. Why does he perform circus tricks on the Republic’s highway?”

“Ask his horse, man, ask his horse. Don’t you see he’s bowing to us? By Jove! that’s ugly.”

We were in the village of Wimille at the moment, and had met a Frenchman upon a little chestnut cob, which, whatever were his other qualities, entertained no good opinion of motor-cars, I could see. Now rearing straight on end, now lashing out, now whipping round, now bucking from sheer lightness of heart, the cob had thrown his awkward rider heavily to the ground almost before I could brake the car and bring her to a standstill. For a moment I thought the fellow was surely killed; but he was upon his feet again while Harry ran to him, and his avalanche of words gave comforting evidence that no great injury was done. When he had recovered his breath, and a villager had caught the light-hearted cob, he began to listen to our apologies. Let me say a word about him, as he stands there, for we shall meet him again upon the road to Calais.

A man of the middle height, with a sinuous, wiry figure, a face bronzed by the sun, and blackened by the work he did at the foreshore soundings—for

I had no doubt from the first that he came from Escalles and the Government's business there; very deep-set, clever eyes beneath a forehead round and shallow and by no means clever. In type a creole, whose "colour" you might detect in the thick lips and the angular nails of well-shaped hands. Hair matted and curly; great breadth of shoulders coupled to a long, thin neck which seemed to detach his head from his body and to permit it to strike all sorts of odd attitudes. In short, a man of taciturn aspect whom you would have passed a hundred times without notice in any crowd; yet one—and this was the surprise of it—whose face was known to me as the face of some one who had played a part in my life, but whose very name I had forgotten. Behold me staring at him in mute amazement while Harry racked his very soul for new and ungrammatical apologies, and I had not a word to add to them.

The Frenchman heard us to the end sullenly, brushed the dust from his coat, sprang upon his cob, struck the beast savagely with a steel rod he carried in his hand, and without a single word went cantering away towards Calais just as Harry wound up with an expression of sorrow which would have brought the Academy of France to a premature grave. Here we were left, we two, staring foolishly at each other and at the peasant who had caught the horse. A more ridiculous situation is not to be conceived. Harry saluted it with a roar of laughter which might have been heard at Cape Gris-Nez.

"My French, my French—oh, blessed tongue! Has he gone to fetch the gendarmes, do you think?"

I scarcely answered him. The car was away again in a cloud of dust before I spoke.

"Who could the fellow have been? Don't laugh at me—I have seen him somewhere. I could not tell you where if my life depended upon it."

"But it doesn't depend upon it. Do not court reminiscences, my Alfred, on such a day. We have done all that civility required, and more. Heard civility ever such a splendid use of the imperfect subjunctive?"

"Imperfect, no doubt. Hence the gallop. He is riding away to Escalles to say that a ferocious Englishman is killing his mother tongue in the village of Wimille. Your speech will amuse a town to-night. You serve humanity, gratis."

Harry took a cigarette from his case, and realising the impossibility of obtaining a light in a car travelling twenty miles an hour, he chewed it philosophically and turned the banter with a new story.

"Do you know," he said, "that fellow spoke English when he was on the ground."

"English?"

"I will—well, affirm it. He said a word common to some emergencies of life—amongst laymen."

"Anything else?"

"Oh, yes, a good deal more. Don't ask me to repeat it."

"Stand excused. I knew that I had seen him somewhere. The face is as familiar as it can be."

"A good many faces are. I have known men that said the same of every pretty girl they met. Such a habit leads to unpleasantness."

"It will not do so in this case, for I remember my man. He is Robert Jeffery, who crammed with me at Webb's."

"Call him Robinson Crusoe, and I will be his man Friday. What put that tale into your head?"

"The man's face. I could have picked him out of a hundred. He went up for Woolwich and was ploughed. A clever man, as a mathematician above the average, but his taste in claret was too good——"

Harry sympathised always when you told him of distress.

"Poor chap!" he said quickly; "it is the end of the story, which I generally hear in those cases."

"Yes, but not in this one. What is the man doing at Calais, at the Admiralty works, too?"

"Carrying a steel rod, apparently. Also riding a horse. My dear fellow, why speculate? There is the sea, and beyond it the odorous town of Boulogne! Let us lunch, and speculate afterwards."

I did not answer him. It seemed to me that the face of Robert Jeffery followed me to the town, and that the man sat at my side even while I ate. Nor, to this hour, can I account for a premonition so remarkable.

CHAPTER II

Of Myself and Another

I HAD been in Calais exactly three weeks when Parson Harry Fordham fell foul of my motor-car ; and, as far as I could see, the distant winter might find me still in that exceedingly uninteresting memorial to Queen Mary's prophecy. An ugly fall with the Fitzwilliam hounds, an ever-anxious mother, the impossibility of serving my regiment with a deficiency of ribs and a collar-bone which the faculty obstinately described as "broken," had sent me from England in the February of the year to join the sun-seekers at Nice, and afterwards to imagine myself an invalid at Pau. Upon the links at the latter town I first met Colonel Lepeletier and his daughter. She taught him the English golf, she said ; and her dear father was so rapidly improved that a week found him in all the bunkers, and in a fortnight he had broken his clubs. I complimented the fine old fellow upon this excellent achievement and his admirable control of temper, and was not surprised that the audacity amused him. "A game for children," he said apologetically,



"and yet one which makes little things seem great to us. I am ashamed of myself, but to-morrow I shall play again."

It was good to hear him; for I agreed with Harry Fordham that Colonel Lepeletier was one of God's best works, an honest gentleman. A "hall-mark" man, the parson called him; and I would dub them both as he dubbed one. In all my life I thought that I had never seen a prettier thing than this spectacle of a little French girl teaching her less agile father the mysteries of golf. There is, I suppose, one hour in every man's life when he finds such a picture and such a thought as I found upon the links at Pau. The more sacred impulses are least to be written about; I hesitate to speak of mine when they do not concern this story. But let it be recorded that I lingered a month in Pau, and that where Agnes Lepeletier walked, there went my world. Silently, surely, unknowingly, perhaps, that understanding, so subtle, so intimate, so true, began to mould our wills. The day when impatience to see my brother-officers and my regiment chafed and galled was forgotten and unmourned. A rich man (for that crime the world has laid at my door), I was my own master—to serve or not to serve as the impulse dictated; to forget my home in England if I had the mind to; to marry or give in marriage as the whim should take me. But the time for serious things was not yet. I was at Pau, and Agnes Lepeletier had become my companion. I asked nothing more of Nature or of man.

The weeks passed quickly, all too quickly, we said, when Oscar Lepeletier told us at dinner, one night in the first week of May, that his work called him back to Paris, and from Paris might send him to the exasperatingly unromantic town of Calais. I knew nothing of his reasons, nor did he seek my confidence. But to Agnes I said, "I will come to Calais"; and there was that upon her face which could make my pulse beat the faster and send me to the booking-office as men rarely go. So behold the new scene. The Colonel at his official house which overlooks the Jardin Richelieu, the English "Sir Capitaine" at the Hôtel Meurice which, should you stop in Calais (and may the gods forbid!) you will find in the Rue de Guise. Had it been the Black Country, to me it were an Eden; for Agnes was there, and when a week had passed, Harry Fordham, the king of parsons, was my fellow-adventurer for every enterprise.

He had left Cottesbrook, in Northamptonshire (for he holds our family living there) to visit an unknown destination in Switzerland; but being exceedingly ill upon the steamer, the impulse took him to come and see me in Calais. A decent horse, to which the Colonel introduced him; some pleasant tennis parties contrived by Mademoiselle Agnes; an heroic attempt to build a golf links on the sandy dunes to the west of Calais; perchance pure pity for my solitary condition, kept him in the name of charity at the Hôtel Meurice, where I had bivouacked. One excuse and the other delayed his re-

turn to England! and when June came we had formed a habit of the town, and no longer detected its deficiencies. For that matter, Harry was no less frequent a visitor to Colonel Lepeletier's house than I had become. We dined there twice a week, breakfasted in the shade of the garden as often, were unceasing in our quest of unfamiliar pilgrimage and lazy picnic. But Harry was the more welcome guest at the house, as I knew from the beginning of it; and if the kindlier greeting he received was spoken by Colonel Lepeletier's lips, none the less it threatened to be the disturbing element, not only of my holiday, but of my life.

That Lepeletier's attitude baffled me, I confess unhesitatingly. My position, at least, I argued, might have won upon his consideration; for few that came to his house enjoyed such advantages of fortune as my birthright had thrust upon me. Nevertheless, this fine old fellow, who had loved to play the father's part to me at Pau, was here so changed in Calais that I began to doubt my very senses and the estimate of him they had formed for me. Frigidly polite, always ready with his hospitalities, sometimes melting to his old geniality and confidence, there remained in my mind the conviction that I was not a welcome guest at his house, and that my departure from Calais would be pleasing to him. If I delayed to perceive this, or to be aware of the true state of the case, until the situation threatened to become intolerable, remember the old fable that Love is blind—upon which

I put the sure fact that my interest in Agnes Lepeletier had now passed the bounds of mere friendship and entered into that intimate dominion of a woman's heart which one, and one only, in all the world may share with her. I was blind, because my eyes had other things to see. To awake was to come down from the gardens of my dreams to the sandy town of Calais and its hotel. I determined that very day to speak to Lepeletier and to make an end of it. The occasion was the dinner at his house. The opportunity should be found for me by Harry Fordham.

The Colonel dined at seven o'clock, and it was at half-past six when Harry, black now in the prim clothes of orthodoxy, came to my room to "call beginners," as he put it in the jargon which amateur theatricals had taught him. I had just finished dressing, and, seeing that it was but five minutes from the Hôtel Meurice to the house by the Jardin Richelieu, I suggested that we should take a turn down the Place d'Armes and chat as we went. "For, Harry," said I, "you must be serious to-night — more serious than ever you were in all your life."

He laughed and linked his arm in mine. "The gods shall weep for my melancholy," he said. "Behold these tears upon a virgin cheek!"

I told him to have done with his nonsense and to listen to me. It was a simple story. He had observed Lepeletier's manner towards me; he must guess the reason. He knew why I was in Calais.

If anything lay behind the Colonel's manner but the plain intimation that I was not the husband he would choose for his daughter, I should be glad to know of it. Could Harry suggest anything? In short, could he help me? To all of which he listened with that unabashed merriment which nothing could moderate or control. He would not be serious.

"Oh, man!" he exclaimed, when my patience was nigh exhausted, "man that is born of woman, are you not blind as any camel with one eye? Attend now to my argument. What befalls him who takes a cleek when he should use a brassey? Assuredly he is bunkered, even as thou art, my Damon. But let him take the proper club, and lo! there is papa, and papa's darling, and the darling of papa's darling in a threesome of their heart's choice. Play the game, Captain Alfred, play the game——"

"If you were not my friend, Harry, I would not go another step with you."

He affected great sorrow, but so drolly that I could not but laugh with him.

"*Meâ culpa, meâ maximâ culpa.* I will be very solemn, brother. Let me tell you of a man in love who is afraid to ask papa, and who thereby provoketh papa to impatience. Ye goats and sheep! don't you see, my Alfred, that the old gentleman is dying for the word—the blessed word? You are the laggard. Ponder upon the cutlets you have eaten in that same house, the excellent Burgundy

you have drunk. Is *mon père* to sit for ever, the spectator of your billing and cooing? Not so, by my halibut!"

A great light came to me even of his nonsense.

"Upon my honour, I never thought of that. Do you really think it's true, Harry?"

"If I were a layman, I would go nap upon it. And why not? Here is the prettiest little girl in all France—I say so; do not contradict me—the prettiest little girl in all France, cooling her heels—oh, phrase most elegant!—on the doorstep of the beast's house, while the beast plays tennis, swims, rows, drives a stink-pot, and does anything but go to her papa to say, 'Honourable sir, give me your daughter to wife, for I have no wild oats in my garner, and I am of discreet age, or should be, and there is gold in my cellars (if I choose to keep it there).' Man, you're a catch, and you don't know it. To Lepeletier, a milord whose moneybags jingle; to little Agnes, the fairy prince whose ribs were hurt as he fell out of heaven. Can't you see it? Are you blind? Must I do the business for you? Why, the old fellow's dying, going into rapid consumption, because you forbid him to say, 'Bless you, my children!'"

He stopped, for very want of breath, I believe, and seeing that I had nothing to say—for I was bewildered with the novelty of it, bewildered beyond understanding or clear thought—he put his hand upon my shoulder and compelled me to look him in the face. Eyes more honest I have never seen.

"Do you want the girl? do you mean to marry her?" he asked despotically.

"Don't be a fool, Harry—at least admit my honour."

"Admitted—and underlined. This very night thy latch-key shall be required of thee. Come on, Sir Romeo, I will even punish the Bordeaux while you throw the glove to papa. It is a clean glove, at any rate."

My head was too full of the surprise of it to answer him, and once more he linked his arm in mine and set out for the Jardin Richelieu. His talk was all of Agnes now, of her, and that which he was pleased to call the right ascension of the planet Venus. Nevertheless, a note of new gravity rang presently in harmony with his badinage, and the jester's cloak fell to reveal the counsellor.

"A man of thirty-one can do many things well, especially if he has the money. Marriage is one of them. Wild oats, kept until they become riches, feed the honour of home and fatherhood. You are growing *blasé*, my Alfred. Life is *ennui*. You are like the millionaire's child who cried because it wanted to want something. Twenty thousand a year, the best place in Northamptonshire, a doting mother, are knocking the iron out of your will. I find you moody and contemplative—symptoms of repletion. As you are, you will never do anything in life. If they give you a brass plate or—*horribile dictu!*—a couple of plaster angels in Cottesbrook Church, it will be more than you deserve. A wife

would change all this. It is even possible that she would make you do something to astonish me. I have thought of it often, but no man has a right to speak such thoughts. Judge of my joy, as they say in the fairy books, when I came to Calais and found you with one hand already in the matrimonial lucky bag."

"Unlucky bag, sometimes, Harry."

"*Tais-toi*. Here is our exception. Do you not understand that you are winning the sweetest little woman in all France?"

"I have a shrewd suspicion of it."

"One who will say, 'Life is not in the newspaper or the clubs, but here in a good woman's heart.'"

"An excellent sentiment."

"One who will tell you that you, Alfred Hilliard, of the Eighteenth Hussars, captain, must do something for the island they call England, and something for the sake of the name you bear."

"I cannot expect her to be over-anxious about our side of the Channel. She is born of France, at least."

"Rubbish, my son! A woman is of her husband's nation. It says little for the husband if she be not. At Cottesbrook she will babble patriotism in the prettiest broken English possible. Do not contradict me. A parson who baptizes and buries them sees both ends of the stick, as it were. You are marrying a good girl—tell yourself that when papa asks about your expectations to-night. The old fellow would grow an inch if he could see your banking account, *cher* Alfred."

I resented the suggestion—would have resented it hotly but for the fact that we stood now upon the threshold of the house, and could see the candles upon the dinner-table whereat we were about to sit. The nadir of infamy surely is touched in that plea, "I am a rich man ; give me your daughter to wife."

Harry implied no such vulgarity when he fell to his bantering humour, as I would have admitted in a cooler moment ; and now, silencing me with a gesture, he opened the gate of Lepeletier's garden.

"Hush ! we are observed," he said, with finger upraised mockingly. "The band does not play, but the curtain rises. I wish you luck, old fellow, luck from the very bottom of my heart."

I knew that he did ; knew that there was no truer friend of mine in all Europe than Harry Fordham, the parson of Cottesbrook. Nevertheless, I went into the old barrack-like house with heavy steps and a foreboding I could but ill define.

All Harry's philosophy was true, every word of it. I knew that the one woman in all the world for me was the one I was about to meet in the little drawing-room beyond the hall ; I knew that I could speak to her father with an authority of my position which few might hope for ; and yet my expectation stumbled, halted, went laggingly and obstinate to the *salon*. Perchance the house itself helped my mood. There is no more gloomy house in all the cities. From every square and hideous

window you look upon the docks and squalid basins of Calais Harbour. The great buttresses of the grey citadel are its neighbours for the left hand; the arid Jardin Richelieu mocks its pastoral pretensions upon the right. I never entered it yet but it seemed to carry me to some prison-house, some silent gate, beyond its portals. And I am glad because I shall never pass its door again to my life's end.

Agnes was at the piano as we entered; a little, winsome figure in a gown of muslin worn as *only* a Frenchwoman knows how to wear the poorer stuffs and make them rich. A simple circlet of pearls about her throat was her only ornament of jewels; but she wore one white rose in her pretty brown hair, and that which her face lacked of colour (for it was always a pale face, I thought) she made good in expressive eyes and the little affectionate mannerisms which are a woman's power. She had a habit, I remember, of laying her hand upon my arm when she spoke to me, and excitement could emphasize the touch until it became almost a grip which seemed to act upon every nerve in my body. Quick in all her actions, always at the high place of her spirits, capable of deep feeling, nevertheless her quick, womanly sympathy, developed to maturity in her girlhood, was for me her abiding characteristic. It was no doll's face that looked up at us as we entered the drawing-room, but a face that a man might remember when others more beautiful were forgotten.

"Why do you always come when I am practising, Captain Hilliard?" she asked, as she held out an ungloved hand and with the other scattered the music upon the piano. "That is the 'March from Tannhäuser,' and I hate it."

"Then why do you play it, Mademoiselle Agnes?"

"Because it makes a noise, and you cannot hear the wrong notes. Wagner wrote it for me to drown the bugles in the citadel. Is Monsieur Harry musical—oh, but I'm sure he's not."

Harry, sitting in a low chair, looked for all the world like some great, fair-haired schoolboy.

"Not musical, when I am the father of Gregorians?" he cried, in affected indignation. "Do you know that I once wrote an oratorio, mademoiselle, and that the critics pronounced it beneath contempt? I have considered myself musical from that day. Horrible term, isn't it? Suggests a musical box in your chest. You turn the handle, and the box plays 'The Carnival of Venice.' There's an idea for a patent. Musical sweets guaranteed to play 'We Won't Go Home Till Morning,' when you've swallowed them."

Agnes, who spoke good English, for she had been educated in the convent at Isleworth—though one of the old French Protestants—was utterly unable to follow Master Harry's idiom.

"I believe that you play beautifully," she said in protest. "You shall try after dinner."

"I will render you 'The Lost Chord' with one

finger—the missing notes to be found by the imagination. Alfred will supply an assorted bass. He is very good on the lower ‘G.’ Ask him.”

She told him that she would insist upon it, and had turned round to make me her ally, when Colonel Lepeletier entered the room, and with him there stood the very man whose horse had shied at my automobile in the village of Wimille that morning, Robert Jeffery, of Webb’s aforetime, the rejected of Woolwich, yet here masking under a French name, and presented to me as one of France’s most skilful engineers. I stared at the Colonel in amazement. Why did he introduce his friend to me as a Frenchman?

“Monsieur Sadi Martel—Captain Hilliard. Ah! you have met before, gentlemen?”

It was upon my tongue to say that we had met many times before; but I controlled myself, perhaps as a tribute to my curiosity, and in a word related the events of the morning.

“Monsieur Martel, I fear, must bear me a grudge—his horse objects to innovations, Colonel. I am glad of this opportunity to make my apologies.”

Jeffery, for so I insisted on calling him, nodded his head in a gesture which was meant to be curt, I thought, and spoke to the Colonel in rapid French. Then he turned to Agnes and left me with her father.

“A fortunate meeting, but I had no idea of it,” said the Colonel, as he led me away from them to the window. “My friend is one of the engineers at

the harbour works. You will not often meet so clever a man."

"A Frenchman, of course?"

"On his father's side. His mother was an American. You will discover that he shares the vices of some of my countrymen. He has yet to understand the merits of England; you must convert him. His father went to Mexico with the unfortunate Maximilian, but the son has been many years in France and has almost forgotten his accent. A most interesting man, whose name Europe will hear one day."

I said nothing, waiting for him to continue. But I remembered that it was sixteen years ago almost to a month since Robert Jeffery had left England, without reputation or prospect. The man who stood over there talking volubly to Mademoiselle Agnes was Sadi Martel, and not Robert Jeffery, the Colonel said. Again I wondered at the coincidence, and was wondering still when the servant announced dinner.

We went to dinner, Agnes, to my satisfaction, upon Harry's arm; and being seated, I found myself upon the left-hand side of the table, and so far removed from the engineer that politeness demanded no effort to converse with him. Already we had been given to understand that he spoke little English; and Harry's frank admission, in turn, that he never yet met a Frenchman who could understand *his* French, broke the ice; and each held forth in the sure and certain conviction that

his neighbour could not contradict him. Once or twice in a lull of their talk I found Jeffery's eyes turned curiously upon me; but whenever our glances met he would avoid my question in a new outburst of declamation and argument. His volubility astonished me, for at Webb's we had spoken of him as a silent man.

"I am interested in your engineer," I said to Agnes anon. "Tell me about him."

She touched my arm with her hand, in one of those gestures I love, and answered me provokingly.

"If you listen, he will tell you about himself."

"But I can't understand a half he says."

"Are you sure that you lose anything?"

"Your father says that I do. His name is to be heard all over Europe."

"Then he must have invented a new speaking-trumpet. He is so clever, you know, down below the ground."

"A good many men are clever there, Mademoiselle Agnes. We admit it generously. Have you known Monsieur Martel long?"

"Since the works began. He has invented a great machine for digging up the coal. Why, are you curious? You should ask him."

"He seems to interest you, at least."

"At least, sir? Oh, I am least, then——!"

"I mean that you like him."

"Very much; I like all clever men."

"A woman believes every man to be clever if he tells her so."

"Does she? Then why do you not tell me that you are clever?"

"I must have forgotten to mention it. I will begin to-morrow. The life and times of Alfred Hilliard, soldier."

Harry, overhearing us, put in his word.

"The life and high old times," he corrected. "I have often thought of that for a title when a bishop is to be written up."

"You are flippant, Harry. Does Monsieur Martel forgive your apologies?"

"He does not forgive your car!"

"Ask him to be introduced to it to-morrow."

"Tell me the French for that, Mademoiselle Agnes."

"You would never remember it."

"No, but you say it so charmingly."

"Harry, Harry—I listen——"

"A pernicious habit! Do I intrude? I will even make my neighbour miserable."

He turned to Martel, and I to Agnes. If there be anything more exasperating under God's heaven than a dinner-table flirtation, I would gladly know of it. You break a petal of romance—the butler cries, "Thick or clear?" You touch a vein of sentiment—a brute says "'Ock or sherry?" You rise to heights of understanding—the flunkey brings you to ground again with "Saddle of mutton, sir?" Or all is going swimmingly when your host's voice is raised to pronounce a verdict, and you, all confusion in discovery, must cry "Aye," or "Nay," as the

case may be. Happily, I sought no dinner-table flirtation with Agnes. There was a deeper, truer voice of delight in that unspoken intimacy, in the thought that she, a little unknown French girl to me three months ago, but now the one figure of my content—she, who first had taught me to say, "For this a woman was born into the world",—sat there at my side, and that I might prison in memory every note of her laughter, and make my own every vision of her changing beauty. We would not tell our story, for it were better untold. The book wherein we wrote must be the book of our lives. I think, even then, that her content was linked to mine—for good or ill, in an abiding purpose.

It was a habit in the Colonel's house that we lingered at the dinner-table but a moment when Agnes had left it; for the old soldier did not smoke, and while he tolerated our cigarettes, we conceded much to his habit, and usually denied ourselves until we were upon the road to the Meurice again. It was good to see Parson Harry, who surpassed the chimneys, protesting that the last thing in all the world he cared about was the narcotic they called tobacco. Upon this evening, which I have twenty reasons to remember, I can recollect that Lepeletier permitted Harry and the other to follow his daughter to the drawing-room; but this was the surprise of it, no sooner was I about to imitate them than he touched me on the shoulder and pointed to an empty chair by his own.

"Let me see you smoke a cigarette, Captain—I should like it."

I sat down without a word and fumbled for my cigarette case. A first drill, the initiating hour of riding school, a *début* as a speaker upon a platform, occurred to my mind as child's tasks beside this ordeal. Instinctively I knew that the Colonel was to speak to me of Agnes. I can see him to this hour, with his trim, pointed, black beard, his sallow face, his large and kindly eyes, his nervous, white hand tapping the white cloth nervously. A gentleman? Ay, there never was a truer. And he invited my confidence. I felt that I could speak to him as to my own father—had my father been living.

"Yes," he said, "I have never learned to smoke—my misfortune, Captain. Tobacco is the handmaiden of Reason. A man can smoke with his enemy at the gate! Otherwise he comes to blows. Let me see you content."

"I am never anything else at your house, Colonel. When you come to England, to Cottesbrook Castle, I despair of my chances—after this."

He turned away from me to lift the shade of one of the candles. I thought that he was a little embarrassed, and I was sorry for him. My own condition was lamentable. I was hot and cold, excited and depressed, hopeful and desponding, while a man could have counted ten. To this does conventionality bring us. Why did I not say to him there and then, "I want Agnes, I won't hear 'No' ;

she is mine"? Heaven knows why it remained unsaid.

"I should like to see your English home," he continued by-and-by, speaking in so low a voice that I must bend my ear to follow him. "A soldier, however, is less his own master than any other man. They keep me here in Calais, and do not ask me if I wish to go away. Next month, next year, I may be a free man. How can I make promises, Captain——?"

"Oh, but you are coming to me some day, if I have to write to the General myself. It's my due, Colonel. You wouldn't disappoint me. I think Mademoiselle Agnes will have a word to say on that matter."

He raised his hand as though to stop me. The unshaded candle sent a ray of pale light upon a face which, I thought, had grown old suddenly.

"I repeat, I must repeat, Captain, that I can make no promises. You will not ask me why—you will know that I am compelled to be frank with you. I wish that you could understand me. It is not to be, however. When our duty stands between us and our wishes, we may complain, but we must not rebel. I do not forget that we are both soldiers, and that one of us will think it wiser to return to his own country by-and-by. But I would give much to say, 'Stay here, make this your home.' Will you believe that, Captain Hilliard?"

I do not know how I answered him. If he had struck me on the face, the surprise of it would not

have been more amazing. It was a point-blank refusal of my unspoken request. He had said "No," as plainly as any man ever said it in this world. The hot blood of my race rushed to my face, choking tact and reason and argument. I stood up and faced him, yet was sorry for him in spite of myself.

"Colonel," I said, "do you wish me to put the only interpretation possible upon those words?"

"If you please, Captain."

"You prefer that I should leave Calais?"

"I must prefer it——"

"You have said as much to your daughter?"

He turned away.

"My daughter will understand," he said, but every word cost him an effort.

"Then I am not to broach the subject to her?"

He started at the question and looked me full in the face.

"As a man of honour, you will say nothing to her."

"Leaving that to you?"

"I understand my duty, sir."

"Forgive me if my understanding is less clear. I shall leave for London in three days' time. It will be possible for you to come to another determination before I go—in which case you will find me at the Meurice."

"Entertain no hopes, I beg of you. My decision is inflexible."

“ I shall give you three days, nevertheless. If I do not see Mademoiselle Agnes again—— ”

But I halted suddenly, and as for the rest of it, that remained unspoken. Indeed, I remember little more of it save that I shook hands with him and went to the door.

But I saw him for an instant, the figure of a weary old man, with the wan light cast upward upon a face of marble. And even then I knew how much the night had cost him.

CHAPTER III

The Panther

I LEFT the house without another word, and sending no message even to Harry the Parson, I went out into the clear night, and struck a road that should bring me down toward the Casino and the western beach. Never did man so welcome God's fresh air, or the cooling breezes from the sea, as I welcomed them in that solitary walk. Not so much had the blow struck upon the merely selfish matter of my interests; but at my pride, even, it may be, I think now, at my self-conceit. Yesterday I had called Lepeletier intimate among my friends. To-night—to-night, I ground my heel into the gravel by the seashore, and said, as young men will, that he should repay to the utmost farthing. Never once did I stay to ask myself, Why is this thing so? What fact, or lie, or interest has so changed a man in twenty-four hours, that he, who yesterday had called me son, showed me his door to-day—civilly, if you will, yet none the less an open door? Anger thrust out the saner figures of my thoughts. He had insulted me, and I would answer him.

To many a lover, I suppose, has there come such

an hour as I spent that night upon Calais beach—where all sorts of vain oaths were sworn vainly, and chivalry could colour a fine romance for me, and I called the heavens to witness that no man yet born should stand between me and her I loved. Let the impression of it be effaced as the folly is forgotten. Rather would I remember the north wind as it tumbled the breakers upon the harbour piers, or sent a rime of spindrift to tauten many a well-drawn sail. How the music of the pebbles, rolling long-drawn notes of melancholy, could touch a plaintive chord, deep and human, in my own heart! The lights of England shone for me with a new meaning as I stood sentinel upon the deserted sands. For there was the Foreland, magnificent above them all, and the star which marked the Goodwins; and other constellations as of ships passing eastward, westward, to the harbour gates beyond the oceans, to the wharves and quays of London town herself. Behind me lay Calais, a little group as of lanterns hovering above the marshland. A band played in the Casino, and its jarring gaieties struck a discord upon the sea's unchanging voice. But I thought of France no longer with affection; and there came to me out of the night a consolation of my country, of her resources, and of her power—even, it may be, some surpassing gratitude to that sea whereby I stood, the rampart impassable of our kingship, the grave and the glory of that multitude of England's sons who had wrought that kingship might be ours. For the

lights of my country spoke of the green lanes, of the homes of England beyond; and my heart went out to them as ever it will go homeward in the moments of our grief.

An hour, at least, I watched the ebbing seas, the play of light upon the waters, the paths of the great steamers that hurried on in mystery as though land and the peoples of the land were of no concern to them. And when the first impression of it had passed I found a cooler head and a clearer wit to grapple with that which had befallen me. After all, I said, I had acted just as some impatient schoolboy, out of temper with his lesson and obstinate beyond knowledge. Another man would have had it out with Lepeletier there and then, would have put him to the question and demanded his reasons, and sought, it might be, to obtain a new argument and a new verdict. But all my life had been a sop to the gratification of my desires. I had yet to live the day when my mother would rebuke the veriest whim of mine. My word was law at Cottesbrook, and even in my regiment the yoke of obedience had ever been made light by a tactful and indulgent colonel. Gold is but a poor mirror in which to see ourselves. Until Lepeletier asked me to quit his house (for so I put it to myself in my account of it) I had been satisfied with the picture my mirror gave me; but now it changed upon the instant—to show me that of a man unattaining, resourceless, vanquished at a word, unable to withstand even a whisper of dissent.

Shame of my weakness rather than self-pity prevailed when my anger cooled. How Parson Harry would laugh at me! And what would Agnes think of her knight, who rode away from the lists because a glove was thrown to him? It needed but this to make my humiliation complete.

The harbour clocks, the great bell of the Cathedral booming above them, struck the hour of ten, when I retraced my steps to the Mcurice and asked if Mr. Fordham had returned. They told me that he had not, but that a gentleman, Martel by name, was waiting for me in my sitting-room and had been there since nine o'clock. To say that such a visit astonished me would be to express myself but ill. The man was Robert Jeffery, after all, then! He had come to beg my secrecy; he could have come for nothing else. That much I owed him for the sake of auld lang syne. I said that his secret should be safe with me, and impatient for the meeting, I went upstairs with quick steps. It was Robert Jeffery, after all.

He was in my room, as they said; and he had not forgotten the privileges of a rusted acquaintance. I found him, his black cape unbuttoned, one of my cigars between his fingers, one of my books in his hands, just as I had found him many a day at Webb's, when we promised him a career, and mathematicians shed their benedictions upon him. All the old effrontery, the old reticence were there. In five minutes he would know my business at Calais—I should not learn his in as many years.

"Come in, old sport!" he cried, with all the splendour of his impudence, as I entered the room and shut the door after me. "Come and try one of these weeds and make yourself at home. You're about the last man I expected to see in France to-day. A lucky meeting, eh? Well, I'm not so sure about it."

I threw off my light dust-coat, and, the night being very hot and close, I went to open one of the windows which, evidently, he had shut; but he stopped me almost with an angry gesture.

"Not so, my Captain—you are a captain, eh, Hilliard? Well, spare my feelings, then, and keep the window shut. I've got a cold in my head, and I don't want all Calais to hear my mother tongue. Good Heavens! I'd forgotten I was an Englishman until I saw your mug on the Paris road. Fancy that, after sixteen years. Why, man, it makes a boy of me again."

There was all the old conceit, the offensive brutality of manner in the fellow's speech which had contrived to make him one of the most unpopular men that ever set foot in Webb's house; but for the nonce I passed by his impertinence, and lighting a cigar, I wheeled an armchair round and so sat facing him.

"Well," I said quietly, "and why have you come here?"

He blinked and looked down at the glowing tip of his cigar. The blue veins in his thin hands reminded me of ancient prejudices—but they were

the fruit of his manners, and not of his birth. We had called him "The Panther" at Webb's. No other word could have described him so well.

"Why have I come here? That's an odd question. I thought you'd be glad to see me. Anything else? No, I think not, Alfred Hilliard."

"Let's see," said I, "it would be sixteen years since you left Webb's? That's a long time. I didn't remember your name this morning—until you'd ridden away."

He threw the ash from his cigar with an odd little jerk, and laughed hardly.

"Who's the parson chap—the man who speaks French like a bullfighter? I like the cut of his jib. Is he a chum of yours?"

"He is one of my oldest friends."

"So; and you're holiday-making in Calais. Rum place for a picnic, eh? The great Sahara and Southend-on-Sea playing pitch-and-toss together. You've reasons—I won't quarrel with them; but the other chap, he's peculiar tastes, hasn't he?"

"Do his tastes concern you?"

"Me—good Lord! If he drank himself to death to-morrow in buttermilk, what's that to me? Nice chap, though. I thought he was going to put me through the Catechism when he picked me up this morning. Say, you've a good car. You didn't buy that at a dime store, I'll wager. My park hack took the same view. He isn't used to money."

"I hope you weren't hurt?" said I.

"Ask the steel bar I was carrying. I think you

bruised it a bit. But I'm an old one. They've chucked me off a derrick twice, and here I am. Do I look the worse?"

"Not a great deal. It's my turn for questions. What have you been doing these sixteen years?"

"Learning to become a Frenchman. You turned me out of England. By ——! I hated some of you. But you weren't among 'em. I always thought you were a gentleman. The others—well, I'll wipe my boots on them some day, as sure as the Lord made us of a different colour."

There was always, I knew, in this man's mind the sore of his colour and of that which he believed to be the due of it. He had told me, even as a boy, that he hated the "white man." No argument could modify that rankling consciousness of an inferiority which his imagination detected. He hated his fellows because they were not as he. And his temperament followed the traditions of his race. Where he could not bully, he fawned.

"I'm sorry to hear you speak like that, Jeffery. There were few at Webb's who would not have helped you if they could. You did not let them——"

"No, the swine! I wanted none of their help."

"But that's no reason for hating them?"

He threw himself back in his chair and laughed brutally.

"Let's talk of something else," he said. "Your pal, Hardy, what's he doing?"

"He's at Woolwich, doing well."

"Married?"

"A year——"

"And one child?"

"Yes, there's a child."

"Ah, Hardy was one of them. I'll not forget him—in hell or out of it!"

"You were going to speak of something eise—something more pleasant."

"Yes; whisky. That's what I want to speak of. I'm as dry as biscuits. Suppose we wash out the Colonel's Bordeaux. Filthy stuff, my chum, filthy stuff; but he likes it. Let's drink to his daughter."

I rang the bell and ordered whiskies and sodas.

"Colonel Lepeletier is a friend of mine. The less said about him the better. Haven't you another subject? I'm anxious to know where you have been since I saw you last. By Jove! it really is sixteen years ago."

"Mix me three fingers, and I'll tell you. So; don't drown it. Another cigar—I thank you."

He drank his whisky, the half of it at a gulp, and settled himself in his chair. The deep-set, steely eyes turned upon me curiously.

Again I said that they who named him "The Panther" named him well.

"You made a quick exit to-night," he exclaimed jocularly, avoiding my question, as his habit was. "The old man said you were queerish; you don't look it."

"I—oh, I'm all right—a little business——"

"Down on the bathing-shore, eh? Well, I won't

intrude. 'Meet me by moonlight alone,' eh? But I thought it was an off-shore wind, and you puzzled me."

"That must have been amusing."

"Oh, it was. I'd made up the story, and you come along and alter the best chapter. Old colonel — young daughter — milord the Englishman. Colonel's duty compels him to say 'No.' Mustn't pal with the English. Milord, the Englishman, bounces out of the house and goes to sharpen a sword on the pier buttress. Coffee for two, to-morrow, and daughter's tears to sweeten it. Say, she's a pretty girl."

He had touched me to the quick, and another word might have sent him headlong from the room. But a sentence he had spoken bitted my tongue and brought me to a point of curiosity beyond any I had touched.

"What particular duty put upon Colonel Lepeletier by his command at Calais should cause him to show me incivility?" I asked carelessly, hiding my annoyance under a pretence of amusement. He answered it off-hand.

"Oh, I know nothing about that. These French soldiers have odd notions, that's all. He may think that you and he are to meet across a sabre some day. Who knows—who the devil knows? as messieurs the Spaniards say. Have you seen his coalpits, by the way?"

"The works at Escalles? No, I understand they are not to be seen."

He half closed his eyes, and I thought that he watched me closely while he spoke.

"Officially, no, of course not. But there might be a way in."

"I have no curiosity on the point."

"No curiosity? And you call yourself an Englishman?"

"Yes, but not a curious one."

He rose to his feet and began to laugh as a man in a maudlin condition bordering upon intoxication.

"I'll drink your health, old sport," he said. "If you want to see the place where the coal comes from, you follow an old chum. I'll show you two fortunes not fifty feet below high-water mark. Say you're a friend of Sadi Martel—oh, you'll keep my secret, old pard; you won't blow on one of the boys?"

"I'm not likely to do that, especially under the circumstances."

"Ah! the circumstances. Old boy's honour and that sort of thing. Well, so long. It's a pity to leave good liquor, isn't it? Let's fill another glass. Here's to the little lady who can't get married because La France says 'No.' A bumper and no heel-taps—ah! that does a man good."

He drained a tumbler and then staggered to the door. But he had wits enough to cry "Good-night" to me in French, as he stood upon the threshold, and returning for an instant to the room, he took me by the lapel of the coat and whispered a confidence.

"You won't be so glad you're an Englishman next year, pard—no, by——!"

And with that he went away and left me standing by the table to wonder at the odd notions which come to men whose reason is bartered at so low a price.

CHAPTER IV

At Two Groats Sterling

IT was characteristic of Harry Fordham that you could never catch his laughter napping. Sunshine or rain, good news or ill—there was the man and there the jest to lift the clouds of your misfortune, or to rub out the tidings which had troubled you. To one over-given to gloom and saturnity (for this picture of myself I must admit), there was no finer antidote in all the kingdoms than the merry consolations of that irrepressible humour. And to it he added a measure of common sense more generous than the Church is apt to bestow. "Make a man, and you make a Christian," was the keystone of his teaching. He spent his days, I witness, in making men.

Harry had returned from the Colonel's house when Robert Jeffery left the hotel, and as soon as he heard the fellow's step upon the stairs he came across to my room and seated himself deep in an armchair, as though it had been a natural thing for me to leave Lepeletier as I had done, and to steal away without a single word to Agnes or the others.

As ever, he wore an old Trinity coat, and carried in his hand the colossal pipe which had been the envy even of the hardy smokers of the shires. But his slippers were remarkable—a sample, as he professed, from the two hundred pairs which the “flock” had worked for him, and which, some day, he would bequeath to a slipper-loving nation.

“My son,” he said pathetically, as he lighted the giant bowl with loving care, “my son, I do not like your friends. Apparently they have recently partaken in this very room of certain intoxicating liquors which are offensive to me. Whisky upon Bordeaux. Behold an atrocity! Red, white, and (in the morning) blue. The national colours. Let us set them an example and consume the veriest drop in all the world of the spirit they call brandy. Add thereunto what the waiter calls ‘syphon,’ and I am a happy man.”

I rang for the waiter and ordered the Cognac. The work of filling my own pipe seemed long and laborious that night. Harry watched me observantly. I knew that he was asking himself how he should begin.

“Well,” he exclaimed presently, and without a shadow of warning, “what said papa? Don’t you see I’m dying with curiosity?”

I struck a match and held it up while I answered him.

“Lepeletier desires me to leave Calais to-morrow.”

Harry laughed long and loudly. The waiter who came in with the glasses stared at him in mute and French amazement. To me his humour was as water upon my back.

"The reasons," he cried—"the reasons for this madness?"

"I did not ask them."

He regarded me with blank amazement.

"You did not ask them—not ask his reasons?"

"Not a word of them."

"Great Solomon! Here's a man who will take another man's 'No' and go away without reasons. Alfred, you are very young, my boy."

"I am one-and-thirty, Harry."

"In years; in discretion, one without the thirty. I pass on. Tell me what the aged one said."

"If I remember it—principally, I think, that he would an he could, but could not. The rest I divined. A French officer does not marry his daughter to a captain of English Hussars—France would not approve."

"France—what has France got to do with it? Is France going to pay her dressmaker? Odd rot France! I'll tell him so to-morrow."

"Would that help matters?"

"We'll see. I've promised to go over to Dunkirk with him."

"Seriously, you do not take my view?"

"I value it at two groats sterling. How far does a man in love ever see? What business has he not to be blind? You're as blind as a bat, my son, and

as proud as an hidalgo when his toes are trodden upon."

"I am proud enough to leave a man's house when he asks me."

"To leave a man's fiddlesticks! And a pretty girl crying her eyes out in the drawing-room."

"Agnes is not likely to do that."

"Figuratively, blockhead. She laughed all the evening. But a little and she would have made me sing in tune. I told her you had business at the hotel—Heaven forgive me!"

"It was true. I found your French engineer when I came in. Of course I was right. He is Robert Jeffery, after all."

For a moment Harry was serious.

"What's the fellow doing in France, then?"

"Superintending the new coal-workings. He always promised to make a first-class engineer."

"Ah, with a third-class character. You can't ride in two carriages at once, remember. Which class is he travelling in now?"

"The buffet-car, apparently—near the bottles."

"Then look out for collisions. He seems on good terms up at Lepeletier's. The Colonel's hand and glove with him. Miss Agnes, I notice, is merely on finger-tip terms. That's lucky, anyway."

I treated the suggestion with contempt, but the sting of it remained.

"He has my word that we do not give him away. But, at least, do not ask me to be jealous of him."

"I wouldn't for the world. There is only one request this hour suggests——"

"And that——?"

"Bed—bed, my captain. To-morrow, at nine of the clock, I leave for Dunkirk. An honest train and no stink-pots. By the time you are thinking of dinner I shall be here to sing 'All's Well' with you. Of course I shall. Am I the man to take 'No' for an answer? By my halibut! she shall be mine—yours, that is."

I laughed at his nonsense.

"I wish to Heaven I could think so, Harry."

He put his hand upon my shoulder and bade me good-night affectionately—more affectionately than he had ever done.

"I will leave no word unsaid that shall help the man who is the best friend to me in all the world."

I knew that he would not. I knew that if there were one in Calais who could win back that which I had lost, it was Harry Fordham, the parson of Cottesbrook.

And I slept upon the promise of his words, upon that and his cheery optimism; and in my sleep I dreamed neither of Agnes nor of my love for her, but, strangely, of my country and of her safety. For a man had said that, before the year was out, I should be sorry to be an Englishman.

Even in sleep I knew that he lied.

CHAPTER V

The Mouth of a Great Secret

THERE was a drizzling rain of morning falling when I had breakfasted next day. The few who sought the blighted amusements which Calais affords to that *rara avis*, a visitor, went limply and with little spirit to the morning bath and the forlorn Casino. Nor was I, myself, in better humour. A night's rest found me with but little hope of Harry or his promise. What could be done, that I knew he would do; but my logic wore a greyer robe than his, and the man who had whispered the first hint of the truth persuaded me against myself. Some graver motive lay behind Colonel Lepeletier's talk with me. I suspected already that it was fear of his own duty, reluctance to war against that destiny which had made of him a French engineer and of me an English officer of Hussars.

Harry had left for Dunkirk at eight o'clock, they told me; but it was nearly ten before I quitted my hotel and wandered aimlessly to the Gare Maritime, the place where the land-lubbers come from—as the parson always spoke of it. The morning boats steamed in with dripping decks and busy

sailors, and Paris-bound incapables all pitiful to see; but found me without amusement or interest. The freshness of the morning, the racing seas which gambolled in beds of foam, the close-pointed smacks, the busy Channel life, and Dover clearly to be seen in the after-lights of rain, moved me to a certain impatience as unreasonable as inexplicable. While I would tell myself in one breath that Lepeletier's words last night were typical of a mood which a day would change, I would say in the next that they were irrevocable as the seas which rolled westward to the sandy beaches and their haven beneath Gris-Nez. The wisdom of years spoke cruelly to my youth of desire when it reminded me of the gulf that lies between one nation and another. For I had not remembered it, had seen only the face of one dear to me beyond any face my life had shown me.

Questions without answers, books without stories, an hour at the Casino, another upon the beach, a visit to the pierhead when the afternoon boat came in—behold my day! Impatient always, impatience grew upon me then as a fever. What was Harry doing? Why did he not send me a telegram? Where was Agnes? Had her father spoken to her? Would she send me any word of her own? Once or twice, let me confess, I went as far as the Jardin Richelieu to watch her house and to reap as a reward those quickening emotions which the home of one we love ever stirs within us. Ugly and commonplace to the point of brutality as it

was, the Colonel's house then pictured itself in my mind as some scene of passing happiness and content. But there was no one about its door when I stood in the gardens to watch it upon that forgotten day—and Agnes, as I learned from an acquaintance at a later hour, had driven her ponies to Marquise to visit a relative there. But I did not lament my occupation, and would have gone to the house though no human thing were destined to tenant it again.

It had been already late in the afternoon when Dr. Woodward, one of the English doctors at Calais, spoke of Agnes and her ponies upon the Paris road. I let another hour go by in the hope that some wind of fortune would send Harry prematurely to the hotel again; but when four o'clock was struck by the harbour bells, and there was no sign of him, the idea came to me that I would run a little way out toward Marquise upon my car, perchance in the hope of meeting Agnes, perchance in the mere resolve to kill time; for all my thoughts were abroad, and I had no clear purpose either of intent or action. When my man had brought the carriage to the door, and we had threaded the suburb of St. Pierre and passed the barrier, westward, to the high road, I began to wonder what folly had kept me at the hotel all day, and why I had left my new car idle. At least I was doing something now. The fresh wind, the saturated air, the galloping seas, the joy of speed, excited me to a new optimism and a better mood. Even the

ugliest road in Europe—for such you may call the route from Calais to Boulogne, with its sandy dunes, its limekilns, its dykes, its desolation—could not abate my humour. The clouds would lift tomorrow, I said. There are days in every life when they loom above us and we cannot see the sun. But the sun is there all the same, and a little word of courage will lift the darkest horizon.

There were few upon the road—peasants trudging to Calais, a couple of troopers riding at the trot, a doctor in the oddest buggy I have ever seen, a priest, a fisherman. As we drew near to the great Government works above Escalles I remembered for an instant the visit which the man Jeffery had paid me yesterday, and all the drunken innuendo he then had uttered. But a greater interest prevailed above it, an interest of the road itself, and of a carriage which must pass upon it presently. The idea grew upon me now that I must see Agnes; must hear from her own lips as much as my honour and my word to her father permitted me to know. Here upon the road to Marquise the opportunity should be found.

I say that we drew near to the great works at Escalles, and it was here for the first time that Bell, my engineer, checked our speed and began to remember that he had a brake. A taciturn man always, with no neck to speak of for a car to crack, as he put it grimly, I came to regard him as a part of the machine he drove, an automaton, a mute. On that particular afternoon I can remember no

word that he uttered from the Port St. Pierre to Haut-Buisson; but as we came to a walking pace to cross the rails by the workings, he jerked a thumb backwards towards Calais and implied thereby that it was raining behind us, and that we should catch it presently.

"Going to be a storm, sir."

"Apparently there is one, Bell. Have you got the mackintoshes?"

"Oh, of course, sir."

"Then go on slowly and let's see what we make of it."

Certainly it was very black. Mists loomed above distant Gris-Nez; heavy clouds were beating in from the sea. At Calais it was raining already, and the contending sun cut prisms of light across the bending showers. But where might we shelter if not in the works? I was debating the point when who should appear at the great gate of the first enclosure but Robert Jeffery himself. For an instant he stared at me with as savage a look as I have ever seen upon the face of man. But it passed as quickly, and he came up to the car and stood peering up at me curiously.

"Where away, my chum? where away so speedily?"

"Are you greatly concerned to know?"

"No; I don't care a scudo. But it's a nice day for a picnic. Say, did you see two ponies and something behind them go past here just now?"

"You are speaking of Mademoiselle Lepeletier?"

"On the head first time. Your old caravan won't catch her, my boy. She was through here at one o'clock."

"That's interesting. Much indebted for past favours. Are they going to open that gate and let me through?"

You must know that they have laid a pair of rails for the light engines across the road by Haut-Buisson, and there is a gate which an old watchman keeps. Usually he stood at attention when I came up; but I remember that he was not there on that unforgotten day, nor did I discover any one else in his place. Bell told me afterwards that Jeffery laughed when I cried "Gate!" I did not see him, or much that happened might go unrecorded here. Would it have been for my country's good, I ask? God alone knows.

"The old flat-head's off with the girls," said Jeffery suddenly. "Why doesn't he answer? Gosh! there's the rain coming, too. You'd better step inside, my chum. I've a bottle of something they label ginger-beer there, but the grocer made a mistake, and I do believe it's whisky. Come in and tell me."

Now, I do not believe for a moment that I wanted to go in with the man. Here and now, after all has been and is done with—may it be for our time and our children's children!—I can record it that I would sooner have met any other man in Europe than Robert Jeffery upon the road to Marquise. But the gate was shut, and a very deluge of rain

began to fall; and there was the open door and the offer of shelter, and, to cut it short, against my will, against my judgment, I got down from the car and prepared to go in with him.

"Run your Pickford's van into the shed yonder," he said, becoming busy upon the instant. "The man can stop there. I daresay you won't be five minutes. We'll just pull a cork and see what the clouds say. There's a sentry here, but he's not as fierce as he looks—not to friends of mine. Say, old Pluvius is out on the spree to-night, isn't he?"

He pushed open the gate, and the sentry stood to the salute. As we passed through the great door it was instantly bolted and barred behind us. I did not like the sound of the key in the lock, but thought no more of it as Jeffery led the way across a paved enclosure to a little office under the shelter of a wooden wall. There I asked him a question.

"You are quite sure that they would not mind my coming in here?"

"Why should they mind, sonny?"

"I understood in Calais that strangers were forbidden the works."

"Ah, the military works; but we're in the coal-pits. You don't suppose I should go fooling you around the forts, do you? What a mug you must take me for!"

He laughed with that resonant, unpleasant laugh of his, and turned the key in the office door. When we were inside he produced a bottle of good Scotch whisky and two tumblers.

"Just a thimbleful to keep out the cold. I don't drink in the daytime usually, but this is an occasion. Besides, it keeps the inside of the ship dry. Here's to your friends down yonder, especially the pretty one. That's a toast you'll drink, sonny, I make sure."

I avoided the point and began to speak of the works again. All that I could see through the little window of his office betrayed a vast activity, the labour of countless navvies, the snorting and puffing of engines, the whirr of cranes, the ceaseless rattle of chains and buckets. Interest was compelled at the bidding of curiosity. Jeffery, meanwhile, watched me as one amused.

"Plenty to do here, eh, Captain? Why, yes, we don't catch cold. I've been on since six this morning, and if I get to bed at two o'clock, it will be a sort of night off. But it's nothing to what they do over the pond yonder. That makes me tired."

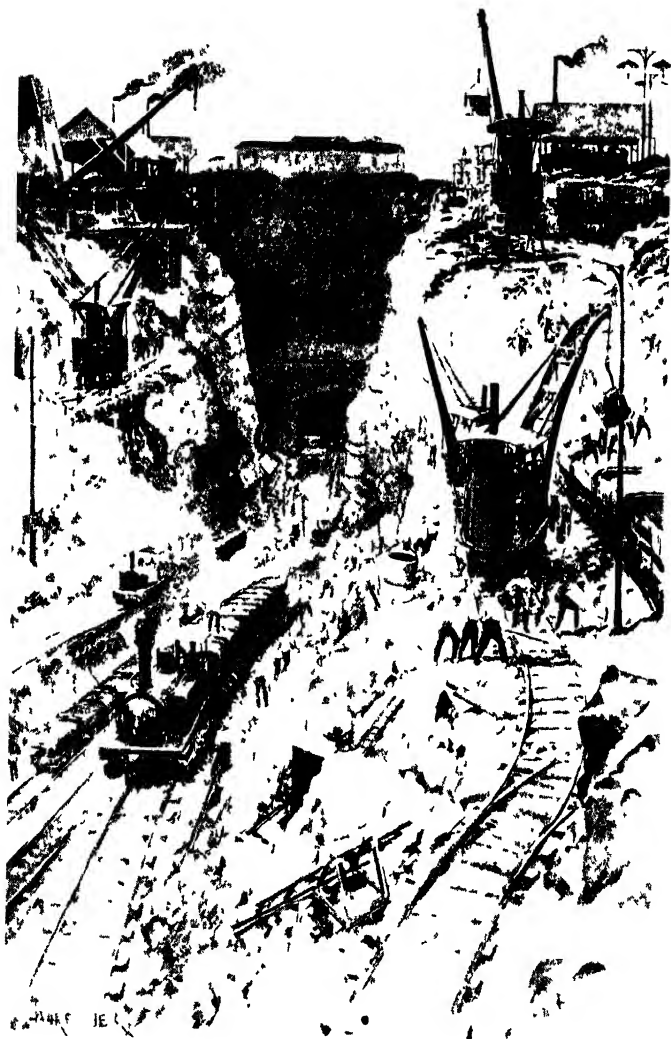
"Were you long in America?"

"Three years in Mexico and five in French Guiana. After that I went out West and tried a couple of railways in Texas. I've seen some life—my!"

"And learned to pass for a Frenchman?"

"Oh, as for that, I speak the lingo, and my yarns of Mexico do the rest. They say I've got a twang, but don't believe 'em. It's good enough for such cattle, anyway."

He laughed at his own irony, and then looking at me sharply, as I had seen him look twice already



"All that I could see between my feet

(and more particularly when they shut the gate upon us), he put a question.

"You were crossing over to-night, weren't you?"

"To Dover, you mean?"

"Aye, that's so. I heard you mention it, I thought."

"Well, I was going to-morrow."

"And your pal, the parson?"

"Oh, I am not Fordham's keeper."

"Good sort, eh? None of your hustlers, with the hat crown down. Suppose we have another tot and look round. It's clearing a bit, I see."

The heavy storm had swept over by this time, and now a great yellow sun glowed pale and watery in a halo of fantastic light away above distant Cape Gris-Nez. In another hour it would set, and Harry would be waiting for me at the Meurice. I was impatient to have done with it; but the man led me on in spite of myself.

"Just a minute," he said; "we'll go and see the pits."

"But what about my lights?"

"You won't want 'em. Come along. I have to make a round, and you'll see something. Ever been down a coalpit, Captain?"

"I can't say that I have."

"Then you shall go down one now. Come along, old sport. It's a treat to see old faces—I'm right glad you looked in."

He drank another "tot" of the whisky at a gulp and passed out to the yard. To argue with him

would have been to defeat myself. I determined to have done with it, and to see the "pits" as he desired. I knew no more than the dead that I walked with a man who had set a trap for me.

It was quite fine when we left his office, and there was even a glow of the ebbing sunlight upon all those dreary acres and the grasslands beyond them. Away at sea (and we were four miles from the seashore as I made it out) the aftermath of storm gave a glorious serenity of scene and atmosphere, a clearness of vision which showed me the white cliffs of Dover, the Foreland, and all the fresh life of the Channel, as in some surpassing picture of Nature's painting. Calais itself I could perceive as a collection of roofs and spires below the outline of the farthest cliff. There were hamlets upon the sloping sides of the westward hills, pasture-lands beyond them, and, to dominate all, the great Cape whose flashing light we point to at Dover; whose headland first welcomes the landsman as he labours in the agony of passage. All about me, however, was a spectacle more wonderful than these. We had passed as through some magic door to a very Inferno of clamorous labour, to fields which had become quagmires, to armies of swarming workmen, to scenes of a great enterprise of which those who passed by the outer gate might not have dreamed in a hundred years. And these were the "pits"? I asked. Already some great, some indefinable doubt dogged my steps. Whither was I going? Why had I followed Jeffery?

Why did he show me these things? I could not tell you then. To-day I would say that it was my destiny.

A first enclosure, vast and marshy, and everywhere teeming with life, we trod warily, observed, as it seemed to me, very closely by those who worked there, but challenged by none. Heavy, buttressed masonry, which I could have sworn was the rampart of a fort, stood as the dividing line between this outer court and a second enclosure which lay beyond it and still nearer to the sea. Here again sentries patrolled the rampart and stood warders of its gate. But we passed them at a nod from Jeffery, and traversing a little tunnel of the buttress, we stood out in a tremendous working, which, whatever it might have been, had neither the aspect nor the shape of a pit's mouth. For my part, I could not even conceive a project, military or civil, which might provoke such activity or employ so numerous an army. Here, as in the outer yard, ballast-trains moved everywhere, their trucks rolling under loads of oozy chalk, their little engines speaking of the contractor and his business. The shriek of whistles, the burr of the crane, the jarring of steel bars, the odd chantings of the workers, united in that discordant note of labour which only the largest undertakings may strike. I said that never were coalpits such as these. And I went on obstinately, seeming to realise that it were dangerous to go.

A second line of ramparts, tunnelled as the

others, and leading to a third enclosure yet nearer the seashore, brought Jeffery for the first time to a standstill. He pointed out to me the mouth of a great inclined railway which appeared to dip down in a vast cutting straight to the bowels of the earth. I did not ask him what the cutting was, but he told me.

"Yonder," he said, "yonder's the place we get our coal from, chummy. We don't go in for shafts here—oh, dear, no. We just walk down to our Wallsend, the same as you walk down the Hay-market. Come along, my boy, I'll show you a finer sight than ever you saw in your life."

And so I went with him to the heart of the peril.



"A harsh steam siren sent to the countless workmen about

CHAPTER VI

The Tunnel

A HARSH steam syren, blasted for two full minutes as we approached the mouth of the cutting, sent to the countless workmen about me a message of release; and it being then six o'clock of the night, they came pell-mell, from the heart of the earth before us as it seemed—some crowding in the ballast-trucks, some running, some clinging to the very buffers of the little engines, some going at their ease, as though labour were not distasteful to them. That which had been a pandemonium of order and method became in a few moments a deserted scene of enterprise. None save the sentries guarded the mouth of the pit. Here and there, in the chasm below, flares began to burst up in garish yellow spirit flames; but those who worked by their light were the chosen few, the more skilled artisans, the engineers. And as we plunged downward and still downward, the great buttressed wall ever raising itself higher above us—even the skilled were rarely passed. A tremulous silence prevailed in the pit. From the distance there came a sound as of the throbbing

of some mighty engine at work beneath the very sea toward which I knew we must be walking. But the man who led me downward had no desire to gratify my curiosity. Passing from the daylight to this cavernous gloom, he had become taciturn, morose, strangely self-occupied.

I followed at his heels as we went quickly ever down toward the sea. When at last the incline of the cutting ceased, and we came upon a level way, I could perceive four lines of rails running up to platforms as for the terminus of a station; and beyond them the narrow mouth of a tunnel which carried but two tracks, and seemed to be nothing else than a tube of steel thrust into the mud which here covers the chalk of the Channel bed. All the lines converged to the tunnel's mouth, but beyond was utter darkness. This was our journey's end, then.

God knows that even then I dare not ask myself the meaning of the things I saw. When, without presage, there is revealed to us, as in the twinkling of an eye, the truth of some mystery which appeals alike to the more terrible phase of our imagination and to our fear, we are slow to reckon with that truth or to admit it. I set it down that I knew from the first instant of inspection the whole meaning of that which the French contemplated against my country—there, seven miles from Calais upon the Paris road. But to claim that I realised the moment of it, or would embrace the knowledge in my innermost mind, would be to boast

a prescience I have no title to. Excited if you will, driven to a curiosity which defies any measure, telling myself that I should never live again such an hour as this, I followed the man to the tunnel's mouth; I watched him kindle a flare at another workman held; I heard his odd exclamations, that racking laugh which no other in all the world ever laughed so ill. If my life had been the stake, I must go on. Curiosity drove me now as with a lash. I neither reasoned nor apologised, for a voice within me said, You shall see.

Jeffery raised the flare and stood an instant at the very mouth of the tunnel. The waving, ugly light displayed a face hard-set as in some exciting memory. Again he looked at me as he had looked when I met him on the road to Paris.

"Sonny, ever been in a tunnel before?"

"Once, a Metropolitan tunnel."

"Nasty, eh?"

"Well, it wasn't pleasant."

"Ah, but you had the dry land above you there. You were never under the sea, I suppose?"

"Not farther than any decent swimmer goes."

"So! We'll take you deeper down than that. Come on, my boy. It does me good to hear you."

He entered the tunnel upon this and began to walk very quickly, while I, when we had left the last of the daylight behind us, stumbled after him with all a new comer's ungainliness. Such a glare as his torch cast showed me the polished rails of steel, the circular roof above us already blackened

by the smoke of engines ; but the track I scarcely saw, and tripped often to his amusement.

" Miss your eyes, eh, Captain ? Well, you've got to pay your footing. Listen to the music—it's a train going home to tea. You'd better step in here, my lad—we can't afford to waste your precious life like that. Do you know you're standing in what ought to be the four-foot-six, but isn't ? Come out of it, come out of it."

He pulled me from the track to a manhole in the wall, and crouching there together we watched the engine go clattering by, all the roof of the tunnel incarnadined with the glowing iridescence of the crimson light, the very faces of the workmen standing out white and clear in the glow which the torch cast upward. But the tunnel seemed shaken to its very marrow, and the quivering earth, which held the steel, appeared to live while the trucks rolled over it. Again, as often before, I realised the majesty of the engineer's life ; nevertheless, the greater question rang unceasingly in my ears, Why had I been seduced to this place ? What did the French Government want with a tunnel beneath the sea seven miles from Calais harbour ? God is my witness that I did not dare to answer myself—did not dare until many hours, nay, days were lived and I could doubt the truth no longer.

We had come by this time a mile at the least, as I judged it, from the tunnel's mouth, and must be very near to the sea, if not actually beneath

it. By here and there upon our way we passed a soldier patrolling, lantern in hand, a section of the tunnel; and once, when we had gone on again a quarter of a mile, we found a great bricked shaft, at the foot of which men were hauling sleepers and steel rails by the light of a coal fire and many flares set about it. The picture was rude and wild; the faces of the men shaped pale and hard-set wherever the light fell upon them; the enviroing darkness, so complete, so unbroken, suggested the mouth of some vast, unfathomable pit; whereunto all this burden of steel and wood was cast; wherefrom these shadowy figures had emerged to claim a due of the outer world. But the illusion was broken when Jeffery halted to exchange rapid words with the men and to give them their directions. Again I observed the quick obedience, the respect he commanded. Of all that unnumbered army of workers I had seen he, indisputably, was General. And he knew his power.

"Clever chaps, these Frenchies," he said, as he went on again. "Direct them plainly and they'll get there, though they've a devil of a lot to say about it on the road. That shaft was an idea of mine, which I'm proud of. We'll ventilate there by-and-by; meanwhile the Belgian barges can beach their rails and send them down to us. I save two days' labour in three, and that's lucky in a job like this. Are you beginning to wonder where the coal is?"

I answered him by a question.

"Does the shaft come out on the beach, then?"

"Growing curious, eh? Well, perhaps, we'll go up by it and see as we go back. Meanwhile, you and I must have a bit of a talk for the sake of auld lang syne. Sit down, siree, sit down. The plank's not exactly Waldorf-Astoria, but it's next door to it, seeing you're in a tunnel."

We were then, I suppose, the third of a mile from the shaft he had spoken of. I knew that we were deep down below the bed of the Channel; and there was in the knowledge a sense of awe and mystery, and something beyond awe and mystery—it may be something akin to terror—which I realised then for the first time, but have lived through, waking and sleeping, many a day since that terrible hour. I was down below the sea in a tunnel that struck towards my own country. Above me were the rippling waves, the rolling ships, the flashing lights of the busiest waterway in the world. What lay beyond in the darkness, where the last tubes of this tremendous high-road were to be seen, I knew no more than the dead. The grandeur of it, the mystery of it muted my tongue, fascinated me beyond all clear thought. The road lay to England, to my home; it could not point otherwise. And I, alone of Englishmen, had come to knowledge of the mystery.

Jeffery, I say, set his flare in a crevice of the track and made a rude seat of a couple of boards and a bench which here stood in the six-foot way. Work

had been progressing at this place before the siren was blown, I imagined, and the tools of the men—jacks, drills, heavy hammers—lay about as a testimony to French confusion. My guide pointed to them with an ironical finger, and, kicking a hammer from the track, made another bench similar to his own for me.

"Look," he said. "that's your Frenchman's love of order. If a ticket were needed for the Day of Judgment, he'd go aloft without it. Sit down, Hilliard, and watch me drink a sup of whisky."

He seated himself on the bench and took a long pull from an old black flask, which he passed to me when he had done with it. My refusal to drink seemed to annoy him. It was an excuse the less for his own habit.

"Well," he snapped, "you know best. But you'll get little drink where you're going to. Here's luck on the road."

I rested my arms on my knees and looked him as full in the face as the guttering light permitted me.

"What do you mean by that, Jeffery?"

He laughed to himself, a soft, purring laugh that meant all the mischief he could command.

"Hark!" he said, raising his hand for silence; "do you hear the old girl throbbing? That's my shield—my own. There's some in Europe who would pay a penny or two if I'd make 'em another like it. But I'll wait till this job's through. Oh! sonny, wouldn't you?"

I did not answer him, but listened to the pulsing

machine which, at some great distance from us, as I knew it must be, thrust its steel tongue into the soft chalk of the Channel's bed, and cast tons of the earth behind it, as though to make a burrow for a mighty, human animal which thus would cheat the seas. The tube of steel in which we had walked quivered at every thrust of the engine. Nevertheless, I know that the work was far away; for I could hear no voices, could not even see the twinkling lamps of those who gave life to the tongue and controlled it. The very sense of distance appalled and fascinated in an appeal to the imagination surpassing any I had known.

"Jeffery," I said, asking him a plain question for the first time, "why did you bring me here?"

He answered me as plainly, "To still your d——d tongue for ever."

The words (and never a man heard seven words which meant more) were spoken in that half-mocking, half-serious key which characterised the man. To this hour I can see him squatting there upon the wooden bench, his sallow face made sardonic in the aureole of dirty light, his thin, nervous fingers interlaced, his deep-set eyes avoiding mine, but seeking, nevertheless, to watch me. And he had trapped me! My God! I tremble now when the pen recalls that hour! He had trapped me, brought me to that place because he believed that I had his secret, the secret which France had kept so well from all the world.

Fool! thrice fool—I was to follow him. As one

blind I had stumbled on to the mouth of the abyss ; and now I could see the depths, could, in imagination, reel back from them appalled. He had trapped me !

He uttered the threat, I say, but almost in the same breath began to question me as though the thing had never been spoken. While twenty ideas sprang at once to my mind, while the peril quickened my heart and brought drops of sweat to my face, he pursued his purpose of interrogation relentlessly. For all that I knew he had brought me to the place that I might carry from it to a French prison the knowledge of that which France wrought against my own country. Every word he spoke recalled to me the ramparts we had passed, the patrols upon the cliffs, the great locked door, the walls which shut in this secret from the world. No prisoner was ever caged more surely. Even at that moment of it I said that the last day of my liberty might have been lived. The words which the man spoke were as drums beating in my ears.

"So you came to Calais to make love, sonny, and the little French girl was to help you, eh? You hocus-pocussed the old man and dished him up with banknote sauce, eh? You weren't at all anxious about the works—oh, no, not at all, and you didn't want to come here. Poor little lambs and sheep! How I do like to see them out to grass. Say, boy, have a cigarette? You won't get 'em in the fortress."

I took the cigarette and wondered at the steady

hand which lighted it. My very liberty hung upon a thread; I had the wit at least not to break the thread.

"Isn't it about time we dropped this?" I said at last. "You know perfectly well why I came to Calais?"

"As true as the levels of this floor, my son. — You came to Calais to make love—to the harbour works. Do you suppose I'm a chump, like Lepeletier?"

"Lepeletier is a gentleman."

"Oh, stick up for your friends. He'd have played a good hand for you, siree, he and the other bit of goods. But I weighed in before them, you see. And just in time, by——!"

He had told me in a sentence why Lepeletier had asked me to leave Calais. This man had threatened to denounce his friendship for a spy. And Agnes? But of her I would not think.

"Well," I said quietly, "you make a good story of it. The other side's to come. Take my word as a soldier and a gentleman that I knew nothing whatever of this business until you brought me here to-night. It's your own fault that I have not gone back to England as wise as I came. And what's the offence? That I followed your lead? If it's no more, you won't persuade our people to keep their fingers out of this pie."

The idea amused him vastly.

"Your people—club dandies and Pall Mall fools—paid a thousand a year to say nothing and do as much! Man, you know them better. By the time

they've cut the red tape off your packet, you will be forgotten on the Healthy Isles, and this work will be where all the world may come and see it. I'm living for that day. There are some on your side I want to clean a slate for. Your slate's washed, or will be when I've done with you. The others may wait, that swine Hardy among the number. He called me a black man, the dirty toad!"

The reminiscence of the old days at Woolwich found him in a more dangerous mood. Temper began to master him. The outstanding veins upon his forehead and his hands swelled horribly. He threw the cigarette he had been smoking to the ground and crushed it with his heel. Men speak of a "glittering eye"; I knew what the expression meant before he had done with me.

"I'll settle with Hardy, and wring his cursed neck, or he shall wring mine," he continued, with growing anger; "that'll be pretty news to go out to you at Cayenne, sonny. By Gosh! I hope you like hot climates. You'll want some summer clothes where you're going to."

I heard him with what indifference I could affect. There was not an instant now when I did not tell myself that, if I wished to see my own country again, I must act then, at the beginning of it, or remain impassive to the end. He had trapped me, but a cool head might discover a rent in the meshes of his net. England seemed far away—out beyond the lights of the Channel and the ramparts we had passed.

"Let's have done with it, once and for all," I said at last; "has there not been enough of this rot? Just show me the way to my car, or Bell, my man, will have a fever. You don't suppose I'm going to take you seriously."

The taunt was as coal upon the fire of it.

"Why did you come here to spy out my work?" he asked. "Was it any business of yours? Are you an Intelligence man, or the dandy you pretend to be? Good God! am I never to build a house but some English fool must come along and spoil it? Don't lie to me—lie to those who're waiting for you when I give the word. You're playing double, and you know it."

He stood clenching his hands and facing me in an outburst of anger which was pitiful to see. A single cry of his would have brought a sentry to the place; one word might have sent me to the prisons of France. That much I remembered in spite of the hot blood of my race.

"If you will be reasonable for five minutes, I will show you how I play double," said I; "but it can't be done here. Come back to my hotel and search my luggage. You are not prepared to take my word; let your eyes convince you. I came to Calais because Lepeletier was here. A little reflection would make the rest clear to you. Is it not rather absurd to make accusations which you cannot support, and which you know to be false? Do me the justice to remember what you knew of me at Webb's. Is a man with my means likely to

come here prying about your affairs? You know that he is not. Let us go up and talk it over. We shan't get any farther in this place."

The suggestion amused him. He snarled an ironic answer.

"No, I guess not, Alfred Hilliard. You've gone as far towards Northamptonshire as you're likely to go for many a day. My! you make a good story of it! I'm a bit of a liar myself, and I recognise the breed."

Now, I have said that I come of a race which was never known at any time for a well-controlled temper. My mother is of Irish birth; my forefathers were fox-hunters and soldiers, jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel. There was never one of them that counted his life at the value of a pin's point if honour thereby were imperilled. And all the world had said that as the fathers were, so the son. Until this man called me a liar I had kept my temper under what control I could; had feigned when he engaged; had laughed, jested, been serious or flippant, as his mood was. But the mask of prudence fell at a word. Had all the sentries in Calais been there to hear us, I must have acted as I did upon that spur of temper and of honour.

"You talk like a fool!" I exclaimed, holding myself back with an effort which cost me much. "If I thought you meant a word of it, I would answer you differently."

He took a step towards me and raised a clenched fist to my face. His eyes were bloodshot, but

lighted by a drunken anger which defied his last attempt at self-control.

"Liar!" he cried; "liar as you always were—that's what I mean to say."

And that was the end of it, for the words had scarcely passed his lips when I struck him twice; and he fell at my feet, white and senseless, across the very track he had built.

CHAPTER VII

I Think to Hear the Sea

WE awake from anger as from sleep, and in the clearer light of reason judge ourselves. While the man stood before me, while his taunts were so many lashes of a whip upon my honour, temper and the frenzy of temper blinded me. But I awoke from the stupor as suddenly as it had come upon me. My daylight was the garish flame of the guttering torch. Night was beyond in the utter darkness of the mystery with which, even then, my awaking imagination could not cope.

I had struck the man with all my strength, and God has given me a full measure of that ; nevertheless, when he fell senseless before me, some moments passed before I could remember how I came to strike him, or why we were in that place. Slowly, link by link, I completed the chain of memory. He had brought me there upon a pretext. He had wished, as I came to see in those saner moments, to prove for himself my knowledge of that which France had planned below the sea at

Escalles. His suspicion being aroused, he had determined thus to shut my mouth for ever. And, in my turn, I had killed him. God knows I could even believe it was that—so still he lay, so white, so pulseless.

They say that in the moments of our greatest peril we often act with an odd presence of mind and a method which less exacting hours could not surpass. Be this as it may, I do not see, looking back to that night, that if another had struck the man down, I, a passer-by, could have done more than I did. For my first act was to stoop and to drag him from the rails. Quietly, I remember, and methodically, I picked up our mackintoshes and our peaked hats which we had cast off because of the stifling air of the tunnel. No doctor standing at a bedside could have fingered a pulse more leisurely or with more patience. But his pulse was still. I thought that I had killed him, and a shudder, such as I pray God I may never know again, fell upon my limbs and sent me giddy and reeling in the darkness.

I record it that I thought he was dead, and for a little while I stood there, held dumb and terror-stricken with the horror of it, and yet unready to admit the truth. When ten seconds, perhaps, were numbered, the dreadful fear passed as a shadow. The body at my feet quivered suddenly in a nervous convulsion, the fingers of the hands were opened and shut, but clenched no more; a groan escaped the man's lips. No music that ever was

written could have been sweeter music to me than that cry of life returning. I had been a fool to think him dead, I said. Many a man had I seen go down to such a blow as mine, and yet be walking with his friends before another pair had boxed their rounds. As they fell, so had Jeffery fallen. The knowledge sent me back upon myself. I thought of my own case—of the sea above me, and the ramparts I must pass, and the lights of England beyond them. For aught that I knew, ten seconds might turn the scale of my liberty. A distant sound in the tunnel, as of a train approaching, sent me to my feet with the leap of a hare startled from sleep. The man lived. He had but to cry out once, and twenty would answer him. I said that Destiny had willed this moment of respite, and, with all my nerve set upon that desperate hope, I turned to the darkness and ran headlong—I know not whither, save that it was toward the land, away from the pit and the intolerable fear of it.

It was, at the first of it at least, a flight of panic, and so much I do not seek to disguise. Judge my case and do me justice. For who would have guarded an obedient will in the face of all that I had seen and heard during one short hour? Recall the scenes one by one as they came before me to appal my mind and paralyse my imagination. To-day I know that those phantoms were no phantoms, but truths, momentous to my country, written there in the darkness for one of the least of her servants

to read. But then I knew them not at all. More than once I could ask myself if I were not the victim of some great jest, of Jeffery's drunken humour—if, indeed, I had not visited but a coal-shaft, a shaft thrust far out under the sea to workings there planned by engineers. A truer voice of intuition forbade so simple an account of it. Always in my ears were the words, "You, you are the chosen, yours is the lot, by you shall men know." Belief in a mission sent by God, and not of my own asking, was, I hold, the guiding impulse of much that I did that night. I, an obscure officer of Hussars, had robbed France of her secret. I hugged it as a precious possession. Come what might, I would seek to do my duty.

And so I ran from the garish light, away from the body lying there by the tunnel's wall, away upon as desperate a hope as ever carried a man to danger. Panic at the beginning of it sent me on blindly, almost helplessly. Once I fell my length across the rails, and lay while a man might have counted twenty, dizzy and breathless. The thunder of the approaching train passed from a mere suggestion of sound to the roar as of an avalanche. Would those who guided it find Jeffery and hear his story? So did the thought play upon my nerves that I stood still when I saw the engine's light, and watched it approach that place upon the unused track where the flare was lifted. Had those upon the train seen the body? Yes! No! I said that they were stopping, coming on. My heart beat quick, faltered,

pulsed throbbingly. It was beyond bearing. At last I sank to the ground and did not dare to look. The danger was passed, then? Again my destiny said "Yes."

The train thundered by, and none of those upon it perceived the man who crouched low to the track and held his breath to count the seconds of suspense. A great glow of crimson light, bursting upward from the furnace, was cast down again by the steel roof to show me the faces of the last of the workmen as they were carried swiftly to their homes and to the light. I saw that they were faces intelligent above the common—faces which the dignity of labour had ennobled, upon which a seal of manhood had been set. These were no mere servants of the ganger's troop or gathered idlers from the villages, but men unmistakably selected for the more honourable posts—the chosen, it might be, for this tremendous task, the sharers of the secret which France had guarded so well. The lesson which their example taught me was quickly learned. From that moment I ceased to stumble headlong through the tunnel, but went on, erect and thinking. As they were called, so might I be.

It was intensely dark when the engine had passed, and I could see that star of crimson light which the furnace cast upward, diminishing in lustre minute by minute, until it became but a speck upon the roof, and at last had vanished altogether in the utter blackness of distance. The

thunder of wheels had now become but a trembling of the tube about me, and that ceased at last and the nadir of silence was touched. Every drop of water that dripped to the floor was a great sound above that stillness. A quickened imagination so deceived me that I thought to hear the sea rolling upon its bed of shingle above my head, and believed that I could distinguish the melancholy cry of the wind and the beat of the waves. From time to time I stood to listen for the sound of steps or the echoes of a voice—but heard nothing. The distant engine, far away below the Channel's bed, had ceased to throb. I stood alone, but never farther from my liberty.

A fool's hope, a driven man's desire—these sent me on. Behind me lay the man who had brought me to the trap; before me were the ramparts and the sentries and the prisons of France. I knew that I could not pass the ramparts; nevertheless, I went on. Courage of a sort made my step more sure. I was ashamed of nothing, did not fear any man's story, was willing to tell my tale to all the world. Nevertheless, I understood from the first that I must seek to tell it in England, and not in France. For what meed of justice might I look for at the hands of those who guarded this insurpassable secret? They would silence me at any cost. My life would not be worth a grain of sand against the tremendous purpose which had dictated this endeavour. They would risk any accusation, any crime, to stamp out this accident of destiny where-

by one, who least deserved to know, had come to the possession of full knowledge. And I, in turn, must call upon every gift that God had given me that I might proclaim the truth. An excitement of the purpose sent me on again with beating heart toward the ramparts and the light.

I was alone in the tunnel, I say, and I knew that the great air-shaft we had passed in our journey must now be very near the place where I stood. A great sense of relief came to me of the assurance that the sea no longer beat above my head. There would be air at least from this point onward, and a glimpse of the sky above me. So great was the expectation of it that I ran on quickly, saying that I would tell the sentries this or that, or would avoid them by scaling the wall of the enclosure, or would demand to be sent to Colonel Lepeletier himself. True it was that a vision of a face came to me for an instant, as some memory of happiness past, of an old state of life lost for ever. Never more would Agnes and I meet as we had met. This barrier of the mystery lay between us as a gulf no merely selfish impulse might bridge. A heavy burden of my destiny lay upon me then. I did not dare to think of it. Lights and the voices of men called me back from the dreamland to the tunnel. I was alone no longer.

It is a rare experience to stand in doubt and fear, and to await the approach of those in whose hands our fate is. When first I saw the lanterns and heard the voices, I was without plan, or word, or

intention. Whoever they were, these patrols had entered the tunnel from the shaft I approached so expectantly ; their lanterns struck a sudden glow on the blackness, and where all had been intensely dark, ten seconds ago, there was now the glimmer of a candle's light. By this already I could distinguish the shadows of three, and I knew that they must pass me, must see me, could not fail, it might be, to challenge me. Nevertheless, I had no plan in my mind, no thought of it, but stood there as one resourceless and beaten. This, and this only, could be the outcome of my flight. Challenge, discovery, arrest. I repeated the words as the men drew near. Then, as upon an impulse, I buttoned my cape about my shoulders, and walked straight toward them, by them, past them toward the shaft and the tunnel's mouth.

"Monsieur Martel, Monsieur Martel, où est Jourdain ?"

I halted at the words, spoken in provincial French, but did not turn toward the speaker, the shortest of the three and the one who carried the wavering lantern. Why had he called me Martel ? Had the darkness deceived him, then ? Inconceivable deception ! And yet he called me Martel.

"Il est là bas," I said, distinctly, again upon the impulse. And what folly, for who could not distinguish the voices ? But, miracle of words, the three cried *"Merci,"* and passed on.

They would find Jeffery's body in ten minutes, I said. And they had called me Martel.

They had called me Martel and let me pass. Well, in the darkness it was not inconceivable, after all. Jeffery's hair was black—so was mine. I had the advantage of him in inches, but I stooped, perchance, when they passed by. He spoke French with sufficient accent; I spoke it as at Stratford-atte-Bowe, yet with enough of grammar to suffice. And our clothes? We were both wearing mackintoshes and peaked caps. Abstractedly I felt about my cap to verify the assumption. But my hand touched a gold shield as it fingered the rim—and then I knew. In the darkness I had picked up Jeffery's cap; my own lay yonder, where the patrol would find it presently. I laughed ironically at the thought.

This little thing, this unguided act, had saved me from the men. But, was it "unguided," or did the hand of Destiny direct my own? I could not answer.

The man's hat was on my head, sure enough; I wore a black cape such as he had worn; the darkness and the circumstance of the place served for the rest. And do you wonder that many wild schemes leapt to my brain as it dwelt upon this fortuitous *rencontre*. If the patrol passed me in the tunnel, why should I not pass the sentry at the gate? True, there would be the light of arc lamps there—for often had they shone down upon me as I returned, belated, to Calais upon my motor. There would be arc lights and the patrol of the enclosure, and the guardians of the inner ward and

the guardians of the outer. My plot ebbed away as a burn in the sand. A miracle alone could open the great gate to me, I said. And these are not the days of miracles.

So behold me again racked with the doubt of it. At every step I took now my ears were bent for any sound that should speak of Jeffery's recovery, or of the alarm that must succeed the finding of his body. The men must have come to the place by this time — must, must, I argued. Nerves that would respond to every sound made new phantoms for me in the recesses of the tunnel. I thought often to hear the cries of pursuit and of discovery. When (and this is as surprising as any change wrought in a theatre) a great flood of light suddenly shone out about me, the fear of it chilled my very heart. Good God! that I should set it down! It was nothing but the lighting of the tunnel, the white and radiating glow of the arc lamps, which, I imagined, were lighted thus after sunset every day of the year. And now they shone in countless globes of the blue-white iridescence—far away, until they were but stars beneath the depths of the sea. I caught my breath again and went on. There were men in the distance, but their backs were toward me. And I was at the very foot of the shaft I sought. The clear light showed it plainly—a great bricked chimney, shooting upward to the air and the life above. Could I but mount there, how easy it would be to escape the ordeal of the gate! • Ay, if—if, the eternal if!

And what of the sentry at the shaft's head? It was a hundred to one that such a danger spot would not go unwatched. I admitted the truth with indifference. The three had called me Martel.

A great arc lamp made day in the shaft, and showed its layers of blue bricks as clearly as in the sunlight. I espied no ladder there, but a pulley rope hung loose, and I remembered as I stood that I had gone to the masthead many a time upon my schooner yacht, and thought no more of it than any gymnastic trick which good muscles and the right use of them make possible. To fix the loose rope to one of the heavy sleepers lying there was the work of a moment. After all, what was it to grasp at this way of the rope—what was it, when any minute I might hear the alarm from the tunnel, when discovery walked cheek by jowl with me at every step I took? Let me claim nothing of the attempt. I would have risked my life twenty times to escape the dread of that pit. And here was a means to my hand. When next I thought of it I had climbed twenty feet, and could see the stars far above me. God! how the freshening air blew sweet upon my face! Upward and upward toward my liberty. Did they cry after me in the tunnel below? Once I thought so, and clung nervelessly to the rope, while it swayed from side to side, and I had time to remember that a failing nerve might send me headlong back into the pit. Anon it seemed to me that no one cried out, and that the

voice was but the ripple of the sea on the beach above me. Again my courage came back, as upon a freshet of hope. Though my untrained hands were bleeding, and my knees barked by the bricks, I went up, up, slowly, surely; and at every hand-pull now the face of the sentry above came nearer. Fear showed me the figure of a man gaping down at me as I climbed. I looked the second time, and saw but the stars. There was the blue of the early night still in the sky. The phantom figure appeared no more. I was but two feet from the orifice.

Slowly now, and with every faculty quickened, I climbed that space intervening. Yonder, above the cap of bricks and the circular mouth, I should find the sentry, should be challenged, questioned, arrested. No other hope seemed possible. And yet men had called me Martel. They were those who had passed me in the tunnel to hear Jeffery's story and to raise the alarm. Ay, in truth, I thought to hear the voices again, there, at the vital moment of it all. Low at first as a sonorous whisper from the tunnel, the note gained strength and volume, became an unmistakable cry, was not to be set down any longer to imagination or to fear.

The three had found Jeffery; the alarm was raised!

I said as much, and leaped from the shaft's mouth, desperately, to the grass of the cliff. Twenty paces beyond the orifice a sentry stood



"Twenty paces beyond the orifice, a sentry stood"

gazing out over the angry seas of the Channel. But he did not challenge me, and I lay upon the grass as one dead, counting the minutes until he would hear the voices.

CHAPTER VIII

Out of the Shadows

I HAD always assumed that the shaft was nothing but a ventilator thrusting itself up to the cliff's head as near as might be to the sea. As I lay upon the ground, waiting for the sentry to hear the alarm, a quick survey made my environment clear to me. I was thirty paces from the seashore, perhaps; three miles, it might be, from my man and my car. The low chalk cliffs here fell away to show me the wet beach by the Cape they call Blanc-Nez, and the long line of white waves which marked the ebbing tide. A heavy rampart of stone defended the shaft on the seaward side, and was now patrolled by the sentry I must pass. I was still in the third or last of the enclosures, and the cutting by which the tunnel was gained lay far behind me—a mile, perhaps two, for my sense of locality is poor. But here, as in shore, I perceived that a close patrol shut the works to strangers. Lanterns danced at changing points upon the outer wall. I could hear the voices of other sentries challenging other passers-by. The man who stood twenty paces from the shaft had kept his eyes

towards the sea and the empty beach below us. It would be odd, I said, to watch him when he heard the alarm. Yet that he must do, for those below were crying loudly now. He would hear them when five seconds had passed—or ten.

A great litter of lumber lay about the orifice, and I have often said that I owe my life to it. From the moment when breath came back to me, and with breath the new courage of the freshness and the exciting sea breeze (for it had ceased to rain now, and there was a wonderful night of stars, as Stevenson put it so finely), I espied the stacks of timber, the heavy steel girders, the earth in heaps, the overplus of labour. Upon my hands and knees, yard by yard, in as odd a situation as man ever found himself, I crawled to the shelter of a huge girder; and through the interstices of the latticed metal I watched the sentry. He heard his fellows now—he must hear them. The wail of the wind rose and fell incessantly, but for me the sound of voices in the pit prevailed above it. What would the man do when the alarm was raised? I asked myself. How deaf he was! Twice he walked to the buttress of the rampart; twice he returned. He would never hear, then; it was all my imagination; the voice was the voice of the night, not of men.

Suspense, they say, is the enemy of time, making hours of minutes and years of days. Until that night of nights I had known little suspense in my life, and the truth was new to me. But I learned

the lesson in the moments that followed upon my flight; learned it so well that if I lived a hundred years I might not forget it. Looking back to that hour to-day, I can admit that no more than five minutes passed between my leap from the shaft's mouth and the loud note of alarm upon the cliff about me. But each of those minutes was to me an hour of waiting. So unendurable did the doubt become, that when the sentry heard the voices at last, I verily believe I wished that he should hear them. Now, at last, the glove was thrown down. Now, if ever, I must play for my liberty as I had never played before, nor might look to play again.

He heard the cry at his second turn upon the rampart, and for an instant stood as one under a spell. Then, bawling with all his lungs to another who patrolled the cliff westward towards Gris-Nez, he ran to the shaft-head and answered those who were clamouring below. Under other circumstances I had laughed at the very Babel which arose. Gesticulating, though none could see, now running a little way to the sea, now back again to the shaft, at last one clear idea possessed the man, and he fired his rifle three times in the air and set off as one possessed, in shore, toward the main gate and the Paris road. I watched him as though a great weight were carried by him from my own shoulders. For, running, he left the way to the sea open, and by the sea should the gate of my liberty be found.

It was a great hope, and it sent me from my

hiding-place with a better courage and a clearer head than I had known from the beginning of it. Providence alone, I said, compelled the sentry thus to take the one road which would serve me best. True, the rampart defending the works, the rampart shaped like a fort at the cliff's head, had yet to be crossed, and a way found to the beach below. But had not Jeffery spoken of Belgian barges coming upon the tide to discharge their cargoes there? and how could they discharge cargo if there were no connecting link between the sands and the heights? All my common sense helped me to confidence. There would be a ladder, a scaffold there.

Without it the work could not go on. As a hunted man, I ran to and fro upon the rampart, seeking the ladder upon whose rungs freedom was to be won. Reason could not lie, I argued. There was a ladder, if I could but espy it. And then, in the dark, I blundered upon it, went over the parapet almost in my impatience. My instinct was a true one. There was a ladder, and luck went down it with me, even then, at the crisis of pursuit.

The sentry's rifle had been answered by others, some near, some far away, almost in the outer workings. I heard a bell ringing and the shriller blast of whistles and the crying of men to men; but I was down upon the sea-beach then, and the lights of the passing ships, even the splendid rays of the Foreland, were my beacons. Had the tide been in that night, God knows what the end would have

been. But it was at its very ebb. The white line of the crested seas advanced and fell at least a quarter of a mile from the outspurs of the cliffs. Not a living soul was down there upon the dark sands at such an hour. Stumbling (cursing if you will), now at the zenith of hope, now despairing again, I set my face toward Calais and ran a race such as it is given few to run. The stake was liberty; the consequences of capture—well, I tried to forget those.

Silence, such a silence as I could plainly account for, fell upon the works behind me while I drew towards the higher cliffs which mark Blanc-Nez. Those who had raised the alarm, I said, were now busy upon a hue and cry which would be the talk of all Calais to-morrow. It amused me to imagine the troopers scouring the high roads, to follow in imagination those who listened to Jeffery in the tunnel and searched every yard of it again and once again. Would they look shoreward or towards the sea, I asked myself? Would they follow the tunnel to its end? and, if they did so, to what point below the sea would such a journey carry them? Was it to be believed that the unseen engine, which day and night thrust its mighty antennæ deep down below the fretful Channel, stood already far out toward the English shore? Such a thing might be, I reasoned. No reader of these lines could share the conflicting emotions of that argument. I saw, in the pictures of my mind, the witness to an ambition more subtle, more dangerous, surely, than

any with which a nation has occupied itself. I saw, as in a vision, the depths of that pit filled with armed men, whose footsteps were muted by the angry seas, whose hopes, whose arms, were turned toward my own country. The dream of one who had been frightened by a jest, you say? I tried to think so as I raced for my life that night toward Blanc-Nez and the open country beyond. I tried to say, "Fool, fool! face it out, have done with it." And yet I went on at all my speed. I did not know then why I went; nevertheless, the instinct of flight was sure, irresistible. I must get back to England, nothing must intervene.

There is a gap in the cliff beyond Cap Blanc-Nez, a gap and a bridle-path leading upward to the pastures of a farmhouse there. When I came to the gap (such a one as you may see at Dumpton, in Thanet) I stood, breathless yet alert, to reflect upon my situation. Did I follow the beach further, I should find myself presently amid those sand-hills which are the dreary ramparts of Calais upon its western side—a desert land abounding in dykes and canals and marshy swamps. Those dykes no man could pass, or, passing, could not escape observation in the intricate paths beyond. All my argument sent me to the upland of the cliff and the open fields, wherein, at least, there would be many a hiding-place, many a befriending hedge. By whatever gate I entered Calais, it must not be a harbour gate or by any avenue from the sea. A child would have known that much; and I was a

child in idea no longer. All my faculties were sharpened beyond any point in my experience. There was an exultation of the night I could not explain. Standing upon the cliff's edge and looking out over the moonlit beach and the lonely sea, looking out towards the lights of England, my country, I said that I had cheated France once and would cheat her yet again. And, with that for my watchword, I turned my face toward the pastures and went on doggedly, stubbornly on—I knew not whither, if it were not toward the light.

Heavy fields, dark paths, fallow land, through wheat, through barley, now with clumsy steps over difficult ground, again with new energy where the grass was good, by such I sought my safety when I had quitted the sea and turned my steps shoreward. Often I was haunted by phantom figures, the unreal shapes of horsemen galloping over the darkened fields, the sudden apparitions in the shadows of a spinney, the imagined pursuers whose cries clamoured in my ears. But all was my fancy—for I was alone there; alone with the clear, white light, alone with the sleeping cattle, and the startled sheep, and the horses that galloped fearsomely as they heard my steps. And no longer could I reckon with direction or locality. I must escape the men, I said—always that and nothing more. Though fatigue began to weigh upon me, and my step was slower, and I said that I had come to the end of effort, my purpose stood unshaken. I must get back to England. °

A vaguer sense of locality, an odd singing in my ears, the sudden consciousness that, unwittingly, I had quitted the fields and struck upon a road, brought me to a stand at last as at a challenge of my reason. What road was it, then? I peered about, yet could make nothing of it. Yonder in the distance the lights of Calais beckoned me as to a prison. Far away, out of the shadows of the moonlight, I could distinguish a carriage upon the hillside, and a pair of ponies that drew it. Who would be abroad in such a place and such a carriage? Again and again, as though my head had been muddled by a blow, I asked myself that question. Who came toward Calais in a pony carriage at that time of night? "Great God!" I cried at length, "if it were Agnes!"

CHAPTER IX

A Chasseur from Haut-Buisson

THE carriage came out of the shadows at a snail's pace, as the distance made it, and took shape with exasperating deliberation. I sat upon a low bank at the roadside and asked, if it were the carriage which Agnes drove, whence had it come, and whither was it going? So weary was I with running that minutes passed before a memory of the day would serve me and recall to me, letter by letter, the words of the truth. It was the Paris road, I said at last. It could be no other. Agnes had delayed at Haut-Buisson, and was returning now to Calais. Obstinate indifference to aught but fatigue kept me there upon the bank to laugh at prudence. I had run away, as I thought, from that very path to end by stumbling upon it blindly. There was no more dangerous place for me in all France that night.

A full golden moon of summer shone down upon the road and set it as a vein of silver, white and clear, even among the shimmering wheat and the darker pasture land: I could make out the phaeton,

for such it appeared to be, outstanding in the clear light and coming toward me with a beggarly slowness which seemed a mock upon my sore-tried patience. Never once did my eyes leave it, from the moment it came out of the darkness by Haut-Buisson and began to cross the open country toward Calais. It was the phaeton which Agnes drove. I was sure of it now. And I knew that she must pass the place whereby I rested—knew that I must see her, must speak to her, must tell her.

A horseman rode out of the shadows and drew near the crawling phaeton. Down there upon the white road, he looked like some toy soldier playing upon a child's field. I counted the seconds while he reined to hail the carriage, and then, again, the minutes as he galloped on for Calais and the gate. Soon the thud of hoofs upon the road became as the distant beating of a drum; and I, who had watched him with indifference, turned in a fit of panic and scrambled down the bank to the edge of the dyke that skirted it. There had been no moment since the beginning of it when my heart beat as it beat to that music of the hoofs. He could not pass me by, I said. The lights of England shone more distantly at the thought. Lying there, I might not see the Foreland, my beacon beyond the horizon of stars. The distant road, the phaeton, the lamps of Calais—they were shut from my eyes as by a curtain; and lying close to the earth, in the foolish thought that it might shield

me, I listened to the sounds as minute by minute they magnified. The man was halting then—was drawing rein. I lay closer still to the earth and waited for the end.

These instants of peril, how real they are to us when fear is tuned to their note, and all the reality has gripped our nerves, and we may not know from one beat of a pendulum to the next what our to-morrow will be! Twenty times as the horseman drew near me I believed that he had seen me, was riding to the place, was crying to me to surrender. Closer still and closer to the earth I lay, to drive the figure of my imagination from me, but it would not be moved. At last I shut my eyes, my ears, would neither think nor listen. If this were the hour, so let it be. I had done my best.

The shadow draws near, it touches us, it passes. We rise up to laugh at it and to forget why we were so afraid. This view, at least, is within my own experience. When next I looked up from my hiding-place by the dykes, the stars were shining gloriously in the unclouded heaven above. Once more the Foreland beckoned me; from the road itself there came but the muted sound of labouring wheels. How grotesque all that I had done and said seemed in that moment! Of course the trooper did not see me. He would have something else to do than to search every bank he passed or to draw rein at every bush. I had acted like some woman frightened suddenly. And now I could laugh at myself—if, indeed, there was not a graver occupa-

tion. For the phaeton had breasted the hillside by this time. I ran towards it and held up my hand.

"Mademoiselle Agnes, are you going to run me down?"

She reined the ponies back upon their haunches. I could see her pretty eyes open wide at my predicament. And little wonder. Never again upon that Paris road will she meet a man smothered in dust and grime, his boots white with the chalk of the cliffs, the mud thick upon his cape, his manner that of one who scarcely knew what he did or what he wished to do. Such a picture of myself I may not deny.

"Captain Alfred!" she cried at last, as though escaping the spell of astonishment. "But—but where is your carriage?"

I tried to answer her collectedly, but failed grotesquely in the effort.

"You must have passed it at Escalles—my man Bell is waiting for me there. I have been to the works. The Engineer Martel persuaded me to go there and then tried to arrest me. I knocked him down and escaped by the beach. That's my story, Agnes."

Excitement drove the words as a torrent. I spoke in English, and had not the remotest idea of what I said. She heard me with pitiful eyes and a little low cry.

"It is you, it is you, then!"

"No doubt of it. The fellow who just rode by

could have thrown a biscuit at me. I suppose there will be others. What am I to do, Agnes?"

The man asking the woman for help! Judge me as you will, I seemed then to have lost all power to think or act for myself. Instinct of sympathy drew me tenderly toward this gentle girl, as though we two had been cast out by Destiny to that lonely road, there to battle for our happiness, our future, our lives. "What am I to do, Agnes?" The pity of that question wrung my very heart.

She listened in silence. I know now that the wise little head was full of a hundred plans. But the night had robbed her of her girlhood. She would never think and act again as she had thought and acted before she heard my story.

"You must go away from Calais," she said slowly; "you must go away to-night."

I laughed, a little ironically, even at her. Fear can make our selfishness brutal sometimes.

"That's easy enough. Tell Jacques to call a balloon, and I will float to Charing Cross. Don't you see that I have no chance? They will watch every gate, every train, every steamer. How can I go away?"

She would not hear me.

"We must think, think," she said quietly. "Let Jacques go back to Escalles to tell your man. They must not question him."

"Of course they must not. Let him tell Bell to wait for me at the Meurice."

"Your own hotel?"

Her quicker wisdom aroused my own.

"No," I said, for the idea came swiftly; "let him go on the road to Boulogne."

She spoke a few words, with a composure that astonished me, to Jacques, her groom, and he descended from the phaeton and began to run toward Escalles. When he was gone she drew the apron back and made a place for me beside her. I entered the carriage unprotestingly. The antidote that I sought to my own heavy fatigue was here, sent by my destiny, upon the Paris road.

"Agnes," I exclaimed abruptly, "why do you say that I should leave Calais?"

"I say it for my father's sake. You will carry his good name to England and it will be in safe keeping. He has many enemies here. Sadi Martel is one of them. That is why he took you to the forts."

"Forts—the works at Escalles are forts, then?"

She looked up at me with wondering eyes.

"What else should I call them—the harbour-forts and the coal-mines?"

I did not answer her. But I thanked God for the words. The woman that I loved knew nothing, then.

"Let us understand it all, Agnes. Martel does not like your father, but how do I help him?"

"By going to the works. He will say that you are here, in Calais, with my father's sanction. If you did not leave to-night, they would arrest you to-morrow. You will go because I ask it of you."

"Show me a way, and I will sail by the first steamer? Don't you see that it is all impossible? They will arrest me at the first gate we pass. Of course they will. What's the good of deceiving ourselves?"

It was a despairing, pitiful confession enough, but, a woman's braver heart gave me absolution. The answer was a touch upon my arm and a pretty word of the old manner.

"We shall not pass the first gate, Captain Alfred. We shall go in by the *Porte de St. Omer*."

"But that's on the east side."

"It was yesterday——"

"Explain, little guide; I am like a child to-night."

"The blind lead the blind round the town of Calais. There is Fort Nieulay. The *chasseur* who passed us will be waiting for you there."

"I understand that. He will wait at the *Porte St. Pierre*——"

"And we shall avoid the *Porte St. Pierre*. That is why I sent Jacques to Escalles. They cannot question him."

Her prescience amazed me. I sat back in the phaeton and wondered at the ingratitude of my unbelief. For in my heart of hearts I said that a miracle alone could save me from the soldiers of France that night.

"Oh!" I cried at last desperately, "if I could believe in anything at all but the *chasseur* at *Porte St. Pierre*! Of course the man will stop us. He

will send to every gate in Calais and search every carriage."

Her calmness was amazing.

"Not Colonel Lepeletier's carriage," she said quietly.

"Perhaps not; but you cannot hide five-foot-eleven in the moonlight, Agnes."

"We shall not try. We shall put five-foot-eleven under the hood. I thought of it at once. The road to St. Omer is over there by the cottage. We will open the hood before we turn. When you are in Calais you must send to Mr. Fordham, and he will help you. I will go to him myself, for they would be waiting for you at the hotel. To-morrow you will write to me from England."

"Every day—it would not be a day if I forgot. You wish that, Agnes?"

We were at the turn of the road by this time, and she reined her ponies in. The new note we had struck troubled her. She sat very still and thoughtful.

"I wish your happiness," she said at length, as one speaking in a reverie. I read her doubt of it in every word.

Long minutes passed before we spoke again. Above all the confusion and clamour of that night her presence was as some call to courage and recollection. I could think more clearly, act more resolutely now than at any moment from the beginning of it; and I seemed to realise that she and I, the little bright-eyed girl and the man who loved

her beyond all that life could give him, were battling for their happiness there, two miles from Calais, upon the Paris road.

There is a cart-road across the fallow, a little way from Fort Nieulay, and three miles, it may be, from the western gate of the town. I had passed it many a time when my automobile rushed on to Boulogne, but thought it no more than a farmer's path to an old white house upstanding above the sand dunes which are Calais's ramparts. Now, however, we turned the ponies to this track and began to follow it quickly. I judged that it would bring us round to the southern gate, and so to the Porte St. Omer and the Dunkirk road; and this conclusion was justified presently, when the lights of the ships disappeared from our view, and even the harbour beacon became but a loom of iridescence in the sky. Every yard we drove now was a new landmark of our safety. The shadows of the unlighted road enveloped us so that any horseman riding yonder toward the fort would need a hawk's eye to discover us. And there was always the hood! I began to tell myself that my little guide had reason, after all.

"Agnes," I said at length, "I must see your father to-night."

She became very grave at the words, and for a little while afterwards was silent.

"Why should you see my father?"

"To convince him of my honesty."

"Has he doubted it, Captain Alfred?"

"At least, he will hear Martel's story. I owe it to you that he shall hear mine."

"He will hear it from me. If you would help Sadi Martel, you will go to our house to-night."

"But the others will be there."

"For the news of your arrest, yes. That is why Sadi Martel went yesterday. My father believes in your honour as he believes in his own. I shall tell him why you left Calais to-night."

"If I leave it? That depends upon Martel, does it not? There is a steamer, of course; but others are not likely to forget the fact."

She would not hear such a gloomy story.

"Mr. Fordham will help you," she said quickly. "If you wait for him by the Jardin Richelieu, I will drive myself to the hotel and send him. Is prudence so difficult a thing?"

She laid a little gloved hand upon my arm and I took it in my own. It was pretty to hear her talk of prudence, this very child guiding the hunted man. And I said that the hour was odd beyond belief—the hour which told me that I must leave France for my country's sake at a moment when all my hope of life was there in the town of Calais. For we were approaching the St. Omer gate now. I could hear the screech of railway whistles, the deeper sirens of the packet boats, the faint murmur of activity at the railway stations and the docks. But the road itself was deserted. A watchdog bay-ing in a lonely house was the only herald of our approach.

"Captain Alfred!" she exclaimed presently, "when you are in England you will remember your friends in Calais?"

"There is nothing on earth that could make me forget them."

"Then I shall know that my father's honour is in safe keeping."

I had feared this from the beginning—had feared it greatly! but the reason of my fear I did not dare to confess.

"If there is one man in France I would sooner serve than another," I said quickly, "it is Colonel Lepeletier. But I am a soldier. I must do my duty. I am going to England for that."

"I pray God that your duty will not wound my father," she answered.

It was my prayer, too; but then, in all the excitement of the night, and of what the night might mean, I would not think of it, would not ask myself the questions which to-morrow would bring. Vague ideas, shadows of thought, half-formed resolutions raced through my brain, to leave me without purpose or decision. The gate of Calais was the one concrete fact. I must pass the gate.

We had raised the hood of the phaeton a quarter of a mile from the Porte St. Omer, and now, as we approached the barrier, the ponies lifted their feet at a touch of the whip and carried us at a fast trot to the *octroi* and the guards there. For my part, I did not believe it possible that any carriage might pass that gate unchallenged, and I sat, far back

among the cushions, with eyes half closed and nerves twitching, and all the tension of the doubt upon me. We could not pass—the notion was preposterous. I would have staked half my fortune upon the certainty of the challenge and that which must follow the challenge. When I heard a cheery "*Bon soir, mademoiselle*," from the keeper of the barrier, it seemed as some jest to herald that discovery. The man was peering below the hood, I said. I could see his lantern, as the light of it danced from the road to the windows of his little house, or fell upon the brass of the harness, or glistened a moment on the very splash-board before us. He must know that I was there. And then—a miracle for laughter—we went on again. I heard Agnes telling me that the danger was past.

Ah, little guide, could you have looked out that night at the darker road of life before us both, with what heavy steps should we have set out upon it!

CHAPTER X

The Lonely Street

THE miracle, indeed, had happened, and, if you come to think of it, but a poor miracle, after all. When I look back to that night, the marvel is that I should have driven to the western gate with so poor a heart and such pitiful unbelief. For which of them, if it were not Martel, would have sought his man in a phaeton from the Dunkirk Road, and that phaeton driven by Colonel Lepeletier's daughter? And what servant of the barrier would have found the courage thus to insult the commander of the garrison? A child's fear! I grant it; but it was very real to me.

The barrier was behind us, in truth; the broad Rue Victor Hugo before us. Nevertheless, it needed no spur upon the memory to tell me that even here we were still at the beginning of it. How to get out of the town of Calais now that I was in it, I knew no more than the dead. There was, I admit, still with me that perturbation of mind, that inertia of will and excitement of thought which could shut out any realisation of the more momentous truths, and leave me with but one desire, one un-

changed purpose. Minute by minute, as we drove on toward the Jardin Richelieu, this idea of flight began to possess me to the exclusion of all else. No plan was in my head, no sure determination of means, but only the will to escape the town and the shore if I might, and to carry my momentous secret to England. I would not hear that other voice of argument which said, "Delusion, delusion! you have seen but a coal-shaft, after all." A true instinct kept me to the path of duty.

Such arguments, such hopes, I say, carried me in silence to the shadows of the Jardin Richelieu, where, for the last time, Agnes reined her ponies back, and I knew that I must say "Good-bye" to her. Until this moment, perhaps, I was but half conscious of all that she had done for me; blind, it may be, to the unselfish courage of her girlhood, unable to see that night's work as she saw it from the first. But in the instant of parting there came a repentance as swift as it was sure. I stood there to tell myself that I might never look upon her face again, might have touched her hand for the last time, might be uttering the last word I should ever speak to her. And God knows what that minute cost me.

"Agnes," I said, "we shall never forget to-night."

"Never, never," she faltered.

"It is only *au revoir*. Next week, next month, I shall come to Calais again."

The promise did not deceive her.

"They will never let you do that."

"Then you will come to me—to my England?"

She hid her face from me, and I could hear her sobbing. The night had unnerved her. Farewell was making cowards of us both. And the moments might be precious beyond understanding.

"You will save my father's honour?" she cried, drawing back from me at last, and lifting a tear-stained face to mine.

"His name shall be as that of my own father."

"I will ask nothing more. In England you will remember, as I shall remember in France."

"If the year passes by and you do not see me, *mignonne*, there will be no longer an Alfred Hilliard to forget."

She drew my face down to hers at the word, as though to forbid an omen; and, quickly remembering where we stood, she kissed my lips and so said farewell.

"God guard you always."

"And you, little Agnes—ah, little Agnes to me until my life's end."

The carriage was away and in the shadows again while our words still echoed in the lonely street. I knew then that I had said "Farewell" to her, and it was as though some great impulse of my being had been carried away to the light and the voices beyond the darkness. All about me the stillness of night reigned already in that dreary town. I heard the church bells striking the hour of nine, and the notes seemed to float above the houses musically,

as above some abode of sleep and rest. But I was alone by the garden, and the step of a *sergent de ville*, who patrolled the neighbouring street, fell as the rhythm of a pendulum beating, so regular, so distinct it was. Would he come to me, would he question me, could I answer him? What story should I tell if any stopped me? Was Harry Fordham at the hotel, or had he delayed at Dunkirk? I believe that I prayed for Harry's coming. Never had I known him resourceless or empty-headed as I was then. He would find a way—the readiest man I have ever known.

A quarter of an hour passed, I think, before he came, striding along the street as some strong man upon a pressing business. I had told myself, twenty times already, that he would never come, was not in Calais, might even be prevented by those who were waiting for me at the hotel. Every shadow by the gardens had been magnified until it became the figure of a spy. I imagined myself the victim of a hue and cry which a nation had raised—saw myself hemmed in on every side, described, hunted, maligned. And here was Harry, pipe in mouth, his "solemn black" as negligent as ever, his greeting as hearty, his hand's grip as sure. I could have kissed him on both cheeks for the very joy of it.

"Harry—you!"

He stared at me in bewilderment that was beautiful to see—up and down, up and down, as though his eyes would never have enough of it.

"Man, but you're a perfect spectacle. Where, in Heaven's name, did you decorate yourself?"

I stopped him at the first word of it.

"In the Government works at Escalles. Jeffery asked me to see the forts. I never thought about it, and followed him. He tried to arrest me as a spy, and I knocked him down. That's why I'm here."

It takes a good deal to surprise Harry Fordham; but if ever he was startled in his life, I should name that as the occasion. Twice must I repeat the story before he could make head or tail of it. And understand, of the greater secret, of that which I did not dare to think or speak, he had not a word.

"Alfred, my son," he said at last, "it is plain that the air of Calais is not good for your constitution. You had better leave, my boy, by the first boat."

"Where the police will be waiting for me."

He linked his arm in mine and began to walk up and down the pavement by the garden. The pipe glowed as a furnace. It seemed to share the fire of his thoughts.

"Let me get to the bottom of it," he continued as we went. "You were trapped into the forts, and saw the things which you ought not to have seen. Very well, so far you acted like a schoolgirl; but we will not gibbet you for that. The Frenchman, on the other hand, would like to gibbet you, and it will annoy him when he cannot. Good, twice good. There is a class of Frenchmen I do

not object to annoy. Your friend, Lepeletier, who is a gentleman, is not one of that class. We will not annoy him because we like him, and the best way not to annoy him is to make ourselves scarce. *Ergo*, we leave Calais to-night by the first boat——”

“As easy as striking a match. The police on the boat count for nothing. They won’t lift a hand to prevent us—of course not. It’s a way they have in Calais.”

He stopped a moment to light the pipe again and to permit a pedestrian to pass us. There was upon his face an amused smile, as though he would not, even yet, understand the moment of it; but I knew that this was not the case, and my own impatience appeared to jog elbows with right-down cowardice.

“If you want to show me a straight way to the town jail, take me to the steamer,” I continued savagely; “even a child would know that. What’s the good of shutting our eyes? The police won’t shut theirs.”

He was incorrigible, Harry, that night.

“Is the first boat necessarily a steamer, my son?” he asked presently. “Have you never seen any other boats in Calais Harbour but packet boats? And let me put another. How do you know that the police are at all interested? If the man you knocked down is better of his hurt, I admit the danger. But do you know that he is? I don’t, and I will not believe it until I do. As for the Meurice, you will find François, the waiter, keeping a lonely vigil in the coffee-room because you are not there.

We will return at once to dry up his tears. He will understand our boyish desire to cut capers at the Casino. *Allons, donc*, we will go to the Meurice. This is just a fool's rendezvous, anyway."

He dragged me on with a strong arm, smoking the while as for his very life. Apparently we were walking straight to the gates of the citadel prison; but the courage of the man was as irresistible as his logic; and I went with him by the Hôtel de Guise, by the theatre—to the Meurice itself, where arrest was sure.

"Harry," I said at the very door, "to-morrow you will be at the Consulate demanding my release."

He knocked the ashes from his pipe and laughed drily.

"Bosh!" he said. "To-morrow you will be on your way to Cottesbrook. Tell Lady Hilliard from me that her son has amused the Frenchmen very well, and that Harry Fordham is protesting against Popery in a check suit and a wideawake. If the new curate continues to preach for thirty minutes, I am coming home again for the honour of the village. Now, my brother, your best leg forward—and don't mind the chalk on your boots."

He marched straight into the hotel, head erect, eyes watchful; and I followed him, this strong, sane man who read the story with such an unerring instinct for the truth. When, in the precincts of the hall, no one stepped out of the shadows to cry "Halt, there!" it seemed to me

that some personal magnetism of the man kept the figures in the darkness. What of the *chasseur* who had ridden to the Porte St. Pierre, of the alarm I had heard at the workings, of Jeffery lying senseless in the tunnel? All these meant nothing, then? Or was Harry right, after all, and had Jeffery, recovering consciousness, been unable to tell them a coherent story? I dared to hope that this was so. The very civilities of those in the Meurice justified the assumption. Not a gesture of welcome or attention was changed. François, the butler, stood there as though to say, "Command me, and I will die for you, at a price." The chambermaids raced to bring me hot water. Harry was a hundred times justified.

"Now," he said, when we were in his bedroom together, "be sensible and believe. Calais is not at all interested in your movements; she is interested only in your purse. What she may be in half an hour's time I do not pretend to say, for in half an hour's time you will be on the sea. I am going fishing, sir, fishing on the deep blue ocean. You are coming, too, Master Alfred——"

I stared at him open-mouthed. "Fishing? Good God, what a man!"

He continued in his bantering mood. "Fishing, as I say. Your comments are not reverent, sir. The urgency of the moment forbids a proper penance, but you have just got to bustle. "Come, now, into your dress-clothes, quick!"

I think that I regarded him as I should have regarded any maniac out of Bedlam who had come there to help me. He laughed at my protests, and opened the door that I might cross the landing to my own bedroom.

"Five minutes," he said; "I give you five minutes. The police may be here in ten——"

"But if they come before."

"Well, they trump our ace."

He was playing a great game, nothing more. I said as much as I threw aside my muddy clothes and dressed myself with trembling fingers. The police might knock upon the door at any minute. He counted upon the delay, upon the supposition that Jeffery had given no coherent account of his mishap, or of me. If this failed him—well, the alternative was the prison of the citadel; and more—for there was that of which I would not think, my own hallucination, the nightmare I had lived through in the tunnel of Escalles. When I remembered this, I could start at any sound upon the landing. The chambermaid's knock sent my heart leaping. Where would it end? My God! I said, it was but beginning.

Five minutes he had given in which to dress, but three of them were left yet, when he came in my room and began to show less imperturbability than he had yet done. Even he was anxious, then? I had imagined as much.

"Well," he said, "does the tie set straight?"

"As straight as it will set to-night."

"Good ; then we will go. Your fur coat, if you please, young gentleman. It will be cold at sea."

"Harry," I exclaimed almost angrily, "why do you harp upon that nonsense?"

"I will tell when we are outside. Meanwhile, I am in command. You will obey me implicitly."

"I am doing so, it appears—acting like a fool to amuse you."

He ignored the petulant temper.

"Come," he continued, laying a hand upon my arm in a kindly gesture, "is it not serious enough, old fellow? Do not make it more so."

"I am trying not to."

"I hope so. Let us go down now. At the *bureau* you will ask what time the Casino closes."

I began to understand. This clever head was playing a master hand.

"They will think that we have gone there."

"If they are right-minded people, they will."

"While we——"

"Are going fishing."

He threw open the door at the words, and descended the stairs as though the whole place belonged to him. At the *bureau* he stopped and waited for me to tell my story. I remember that I repeated the words as a schoolboy repeats a verse of poetry, without any right sense of phrase or meaning. "What time did the Casino close?" The man said, "Half-past ten, monsieur." I thanked him, and, linking my arm in Harry's, went out toward the sea.

The night had fallen clear and calm after the rain. There were few abroad, but at the corner of the Rue du Rampart a *chasseur-à-cheval* passed us at a canter. I knew that he was riding to the Meurice with news of me, and that we had escaped him by two minutes.

CHAPTER XI

Old Bordenave

WE stood until the horseman had turned the corner of the Rue du Havre, and then went on with quickened steps towards the light-house and the railway. Neither of us spoke, for the story behind us needed no words. But Harry's lengthening stride betrayed him. I knew now that he feared for me as I had feared for myself in the hotel.

Through the railway gates, by the wharves, straight on to the quay of the inner harbour, we went doggedly, silently, at a walk which threatened soon to become a run. Never once did Harry pause now or look behind him; no word of explanation did he vouchsafe. Straight as a line he went to the harbour quay and the fishing fleet there, and I followed him without protest or comment. The figure of the *chasseur* loomed always in the mists behind me. I could indicate no better direction than that which carried us away from the shadows.

We crossed the quay, I say, and came to one of

the long ladders by which you descend to the water and the boats. The tide had been making since I quitted the beach by Blanc-Nez, and now it rushed and swirled about the huddled fishing-boats which were here preparing for their long night's work. In the instant of waiting at the ladder's head I remembered that Harry had often fished with old Jules Bordenave, the owner of five good smacks in Calais, and that there was no valid reason why he should not fish once more that night. Good Lord! I said, to think that I had been unable to see, as it were, a yard before my nose, where this idea was hatched. And now it appeared so simple a thing that I saw it as in a flash—I would not ask a single question.

We descended the ladder, and, crossing a couple of smacks that lay warped close to the quay, we found old Jules Bordenave's boat the third from the ladder—a trim ship, lugger-rigged, as all the Frenchmen are, and ready, it appeared, for the night's work before her. There was no living thing on deck save a mangy dog which came up and licked our hands fawningly; but Harry went straight to the cuddy aft, and diving down the wretched companion, he dragged me after him to as close and stinking a hole as ever I have put my nose in since I was born.

“Good-evening, Bordenave. We are here, you see.”

The fat fisherman, the very relic of a man, grimy, salted, broad-faced, struggled to his feet,

and cuffing a lazy, barefooted lad, who sprawled upon a bench, he made room for us and said something very quickly. I could not follow much of it, but Harry interpreted.

"This is old Bordenave," he exclaimed by way of introduction. "He'd sell his soul for threepence-halfpenny. Say something about fishing. Lucky, wasn't it? He sent word round to the hotel to-day, asking me to come."

I nodded my head and stammered a few words which seemed to amuse old Bordenave very much. Harry had fished with him often before. Our visit was no surprise—if my clothes were.

"Monsieur was going to the Casino, but he changed his mind," Harry rattled on boisterously. "All Englishmen like to change their minds; it pleases them. We'll show him something better than dancing, eh, Bordenave?"

Bordenave smiled like a child at the mention of the Casino.

"Ah!" he said, "that costs dear, *là bas*, the dancing. You will not catch any big fish there, monsieur. They are all thieves—and the Englishman—he likes to be robbed. Better to follow the Abbé Fordham. You will dance because you are so well to-morrow."

"And give you twenty francs to drink that same health," interposed Harry. "Well, we are quite ready, Bordenave, if you can go now."

"At your service, monsieur. We shall have the tide in ten minutes. There is plenty outside. A

fresh night, messieurs, with a falling breeze. Will it be for long?"

"A good sail, Bordenave. Make Dover if you can. But you can't, of course you can't. I've bet my friend twenty louis you could. A hundred francs if you do."

Old Bordenave stiffened up at the words.

"Not make Dover? Oh, we shall see, monsieur, we shall see. A hundred francs, you said?"

"And I'll give you another hundred, Bordenave," I interposed, in a jargon which was wonderful. "Not a word to any of your friends up there, if they come asking after us. It's a wager, you know."

The old fellow waited for no more, but went up the companion as though a spear-point drove him. Two hundred francs! You must catch a lot of fish to make two hundred francs. If anything saved us that night, it would be greed, I said. But we were one-and-twenty miles from safety still, and if I live a thousand years I shall never hunger for a sight of the cliffs of Dover as I hungered for them in those moments of delay. For we were alone then, Harry and I, in the stinking cabin. A dirty lamp cast a wan jet of light upon our pale faces; it seemed to mock our odd attire. Each knew of what the other thought; no question was put or answered. The *chasseur* who had ridden to the Meurice, what was his occupation? Dancing at the Casino, perhaps. Desperation of thought is akin to farce; you tell yourself any nonsense when you are really afraid.



“We descended the ladder.”

"Harry," I said, when old Bordenave had gone up, "it's ten to one we are boarded."

He took out his pipe and began to fill it.

"The Cloth doesn't bet," he said, "or I'd lay twenty. There was once a parson at Derby who saw two dogs fighting in the aisle of his church. He was one of the old sporting kind. When he had rebuked his flock for the attention they paid to the dogs, and found they wouldn't listen to him, he said, 'Well, my brethren, if you won't have the Gospel, I'll lay two to one on the black!' The good old times are gone, my brother. I have even had a dear old soul threaten to write to my bishop because I play golf. She said that I was heard to say, 'Damme one.' What I really said was 'Dormy one.' There is a considerable difference from an ecclesiastical standpoint."

He lit his pipe and went rambling on again—stories, jests, any flippant talk to keep my thoughts from the quay above and those who might appear upon the quay presently. And just as I understood those surpassing minutes of delay, so did he understand them. To be caught there in the cabin of old Bordenave's boat would be the ultimate ignominy. If we could but get to sea, away, if it were but a mile from that cursed town of Calais, a man might dare to breathe again. But it held us as a prison. Would the smack never weigh? I asked. How Bordenave and his crew raved and ranted on the deck above! You would have thought that the railway-station was on fire, or the Hôtel de Ville. But

it was nothing, nothing at all—only an argument with a neighbouring fisherman. And now the lamp began to swing in the musty cabin. The seas, lapping upon our sides, beat the bows of the smack more heavily. We lifted to them and sank again. The cries of rage and fury were changed to the methodical words of command. I knew that we were at sea; and when Harry rose and cried, "Thank God!" the chain of my nervous tension snapped as at a blow, and the sweat poured down my face like rain.

"Thank God! We are out of the harbour, my son. Do you feel her lifting? She is making what our friends upstairs call the *chenal*. They are using the sweeps to get her out. You will be in Dover before sunrise, old fellow."

I threw off my heavy fur coat and wiped the perspiration from my face.

"It's worse than forty minutes in the Grafton county. Good God! I shall die for want of breath."

He sat down upon the bench again and struck another match.

"If the moon behaves decently, we'll go upstairs in ten minutes. My pipe's out, you observe. A man who lets his pipe out has been thinking pretty badly. Let me see you smoke, and I'll begin to believe in you."

I felt in the pocket of my coat for a pipe, and filled it deliberately. As bad a sailor as ever ventured upon a "pleasure" ship at Margate, the excitement of the night drove all thought of sickness from my

head, and found me, for the first time in my life, able to smoke upon a ship. And Harry was talking again now. I said that he would talk all the way to Dover.

"I want to hear the story again," he exclaimed, when the pipe was going. "Let us have it from the beginning—the whole thing, and no cuts. I must get to the bottom of it—if I can."

I settled myself upon the bench, and told him the whole of it this time.

"As God is my witness," I said, "I believe that the French are trying to make a tunnel to England as we contemplated making one to France some years ago. You understand now why my wits are gone wandering."

He thought upon it for a little while without any of those haphazard conclusions which are my trouble. I envied his power of silent reasoning ; but I knew that he would jest no more.

"Let us pan it out," he replied, with his composure unruffled. "You go to Escalles, and a man takes you down a cutting at the Government works there, and shows you a tunnel running under the sea. We, in England, know that the French are undertaking great schemes on the coast, and the official explanation to our Government is that they are marine works and coal-shaftings. That accounts for the swarm of workmen, the engines, the earth, and all the rest of it. But, my dear fellow, if they had greater designs, if, as a supposition, they were making a tunnel, don't you think that one of those

workmen would give it away, and that our Intelligence people would hear of it in twenty-four hours. Why, of course they would. There has never yet been a great surprise of war sprung upon one nation by another, and there never will be. What you saw was a shaft to reach the coal which French geologists believe to be under Cap Blanc-Nez. Your nerves were all wrong, and you went at your conclusions headlong, like a baby horse at its first fence. The man who was with you forced his own ideas upon you and you accepted them. He would be pleased enough to see you arrested, but not for the reasons you imagine. *Cherchez la femme*, and you understand his game. A threat to Lepeletier accounts for all that happened at the Colonel's house last night. Jeffery named you to his superiors for a spy, and enticed you into the tunnel. I have undone the lid of the trap, and here we are a mile from Calais already. Confess that nothing remains but for you to lie by at Cottesbrook for a month or so, and for me to return to Lepeletier and to have it out with him. But I shan't mention a tunnel, because I don't believe in one."

I heard him to the end without protest, and then put my own case. His logic was unanswerable from his point of view. But I had seen that which neither he nor any other of my countrymen will ever see. Minute by minute my mental vision became clearer. I could build up the arguments for myself now.

"Ask yourself two or three questions, Harry," I said quietly, for the very subject gripped the mind

as in a vice. "In the first place, did our own engineers believe that it was impossible to build a tunnel from Dover to Calais?"

"They convinced Gladstone and Watkin, at any rate."

"There was talk, I know, about the trouble of levels and ventilation, but the scheme was supported by any amount of money, and the sanity of Parliament alone saved us from it. Very well, what we can do the French can do. That is my first point."

"Go on, my dear fellow—I admit all that."

"And, admitting it, you open the door for my second. If it is possible to build a tunnel from Calais to Dover, I don't see why a nation, which from the days of Napoleon has invited madcap schemes for the invasion of England, should not turn to this scheme. Here is a dare-devil engineer who comes to them and says, 'You are tunnelling for coal under the sea at Escalles. Give me permission, and I will carry you a shaft through to Dover.' If they listen to him, the next point is to cover their intentions. They plead before Europe their marine works, a great harbour scheme such as we are planning at Dover. That permits them, as you say, to accumulate stores, workmen, and engines. The thousands of tons of earth they bring out are not measured by English spades. They watch the works as they watch their forts, and no stranger, until to-night, has come within a quarter of a mile of them. An Intelligence Department given to somnolence is apt to take Government pretensions as it

finds them. It lightens the burden of responsibility and is a cloak for laziness. Admit that our Intelligence Department has done this, and all else follows. The scheme is daring to the point of fatality ; but it is not half so wild as many a scheme of invasion to which France has listened during the last twenty years. That, at least, is my first opinion. I do not think that I shall change it to-morrow."

He listened to me with growing interest. That terrible doubt of the problem served one purpose at least, the purpose of causing us to forget where we stood and the danger which encompassed us about. I was oblivious, I think, of the fact that we were on a ship in the outer channel of Calais Harbour. Harry, in his turn, was as serious as ever I had seen him since the day the Bishop ordained him at Ely Cathedral.

"Alfred, old fellow," he said, "I could pray God that all you tell me this night is imagination. If it's that, to-morrow will be the end of it. If not, you have a great work to do in England. For my part my mind is in a mist, and I cannot see where your thoughts are going to. You say the pretext of a harbour covers the swarm of workmen at Escalles ; but what of their tongues when they are outside the works ? Why does none of them write a word to our people offering the secret for a money payment ? Is it possible to believe in the silence of a couple of thousand ? "

"Always supposing that a couple of thousand are in the secret."

"Ah! I hadn't thought of that."

"But I had. The men who passed me in the tunnel were not *ouvriers* at all. I should not have called them navvies or even mechanics. They looked to me like skilled engineers. And, I ask you, what if these men are a chosen hundred, engaged to carry the secret through unknown to the mob above? It might be so, Harry."

He lit his pipe and nodded his head slowly.

"Yes, I see that; and when the work was done at Escalles, there would be Dover to consider. What are they doing at Dover, my son?"

"God knows! If ever I see Dover again, I will tell you."

He stood up and went to the companion hatch.

The movement itself betrayed his restlessness of thought and idea. Presently he said, "You will make Dover anyway. The lights of Calais are a mile behind us."

I rose to follow him, but at the foot of the companion he put his hand upon my shoulder again.

"Remember," he continued, "you may have a great work to do in England, Alfred Hilliard. Few would do it better. God bless you, old fellow, whatever it may be!"

I went up after him to God's fresh air and the sweetness of the night; but his words remained with me. In England, my country, I might yet find a great work to do.

CHAPTER XII

A Chain of Fire

THERE had been a full gale blowing from the north-east when the rainstorm burst upon Escalles some hours ago; but the wind had fallen with the night, and now it was no more than a fresh breeze, sweeping down Channel from the east and permitting the lugger to carry every sail she could set. A trim sea boat, speedy as all luggers are, she lay upon a course north by west, and met the tumbling swell with good bows that lifted her dripping decks triumphantly above the angry crests. She would make Dover in four hours, or five at the most, it appeared. Old Bordenave named four; but he loved the ship with a woman's heart. And an hour more or less, how would that help us!

"You wish to fish, Monsieur l'Abbé. No? well, it's all the same to me. We shall have a good night, messieurs. Gris-Nez is very bright, but that is the rain. You see the Foreland in a mist, and you say 'Very good.' When he shines in a ring, take care. If we had been fishing to-night, we



“The rocket, messieurs! look at the rocket!”

Pro Patria!

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should not have made our fortunes. Very good, we will not fish."

I laughed when he called Harry "Monsieur l'Abbé," and I dubbed my friend so from that hour. He has been "Monsieur l'Abbé" to all Northamptonshire since that day. The cloak of the jest came as a pall upon our anxieties, and we were still laughing together when the boy at the tiller called out—

"The rocket, messieurs, look at the rocket."

A sudden hush fell upon the ship. Yonder, by Escalles, some one had fired a rocket outward above the sea, and from the citadel at Calais another rocket ascended in an orbit of gold-blue light. A second and a third signal from Escalles remained unanswered from the fort; but away towards the west, by Gris-Nez and the coast, other rockets shot up from other stations, until it seemed that the bows of flame were arched in the sky to make a great chain of fire from Calais Fort to Boulogne Harbour.

We watched the lights with a curiosity which prevailed above words. Old Bordenave alone was amused by them.

"Look yonder," he said, good-humouredly. "That is how they keep themselves warm at Escalles. One, two, threc, *nom de Dieu*, it is a *fête*, then! We shall want a bottle of wine to dance to that, Monsieur l'Abbé. And another from Wissant! Then some poor devil is out of the prison. There was one last week, and they shot him under the wall of the harbour works. I do not like to hear of that—I am too old. Give me law and order and the long legs,

Abbé. And God send an open door for that poor fellow."

In my heart I said "Amen," and when the old man turned to me he found a ready seconder. Nevertheless, he looked at me a little closer than he had done, and afterwards his eyes searched our wake to learn if any boat were coming out of Calais Harbour. But we were alone there. Other smacks, it is true, lay beyond us towards Dover and the open sea; but no vessel swam in the hither water between Calais Harbour and the lugger. And the wind fell to the softest of breezes. We should never make Dover in four hours, I told myself—perhaps not in ten.

"That bottle of wine, Bordenave," I exclaimed, seeking to draw him from the deck; "we were in such a hurry to go fishing with you that we forgot to dine. If you have a biscuit and a glass of wine I will say that your boat is not to be beaten between Finisterre and Flamborough Head. Come, there is a bottle of wine aboard, ancient?"

The old man heard me affably enough. He was one of those thirsty souls who lick their lips whenever they hear a cork go pop; and at the word "wine" the sun seemed to shine upon him again.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, as though he meant nothing at all by the remark, "then you came away in a hurry, monsieur?"

Harry was up in arms in a moment.

"Captain Hilliard is always in a hurry when the ladies are about, Bordenave. He thought he was

going to the Casino. A word to the wise. He left his dinner for *les beaux yeux*. And now he's starving. Give him a biscuit and he will show you a splendid set of teeth—all his own, too."

Bordenave looked at me again, at my dress-suit, my fur coat, perchance at my haggard face—for the hotel glass had shown me how haggard it was. But, whatever his suspicions might have been, he was either too avaricious or too benevolent to think more of them; and with a word that might have meant nothing, or might have meant a good deal, he led the way down the companion into the stinking cabin again.

"Let us go below, Abbé. Sometimes it is good to be where people cannot see you. If the Captain is hungry, we will take care of him. I am hungry myself, and I have no teeth, you say. All the better to rob the dentists—the thieves who cry, 'Buy your teeth of me, and I will take your old ones away for nothing.' If they would send their fireworks up for the dentists I would say 'Bravo!' This way, messieurs, and mind the dog."

Chattering and laughing always, he made a place for us on the benches of the cabin and produced his treasures. The assortment was odd, to the point of laughter. A roll of coarse sausage, rich and abundant; some cooked fish in a piece of blue paper; a yard of delicious white bread, and butter abundantly. For the rest, onions, beetroot, coffee from a tin-pot, milk in a basin, and three bottles of harsh *vin du pays*, sharp, heavy, acrid, honest. I have dined

under curious circumstances many times in my life, but never as I dined then. In spite of all, of the pathos, the pity, the fear of that which I had undergone, my hunger would have satisfied a *gourmand*. And the stimulating properties of the raucous wine found me grateful. They gave me a false courage, which, at least, permitted me to forget that rockets were being fired from the heights of Blanc-Nez, and that the long night must pass before we made Dover Harbour.

"Well, skipper, it will be four hours yet, don't you think?"

"Give me a wind, monsieur, and it shall be three."

"But if the wind drops?"

"A sensible question," chimed in Harry. "If the wind drops, we shall get out and push. What do you say, Bordenave—shall we get out and push?"

"Oh, the Abbé is master here. If he thinks that he can walk upon the sea—very good. I remember a fellow who made shoes in which to walk from Gris-Nez to Folkestone. *Sapristi!* what shoes they were! He was drowned off Wissant, and we buried him with his shoes in the cemetery there. That is the way with all those fellows. They have it all in their heads, and then they try to teach the sea. The sea says 'No,' and down they go."

"As the man in the flying machine," said I. "When I was a youngster I saw one fall headlong, at Knightsbridge, in London. I could see him clawing at the air as he came down. He fell with

a sickening thud which I hear now when I dream. It was just as though all his bones went snap at once."

"Pray for his soul," cried Bordenave; "God has not meant us to fly, monsieur. If He had, we should have found the place where the wings go on. I do not want to fly, and I am happy. The earth is good enough for me—the earth and the sea. Fill your glass, Abbé, and drink to the sea. You owe her something to-night, do you not?"

I looked up quickly at Harry and caught his warning glance. The rockets at Gris-Nez had not been fired in vain, then! This cunning old Frenchman could share their secret. I would have staked a fortune on it.

"The sea, by all means," cried Harry, raising his glass willingly; "the sea, and the skipper of the smack *Hirondelle*. I drink to you, Bordenave. You will make Dover, after all."

The old seaman emptied a mug of wine at a draught and filled another pipe.

"The Abbé said a hundred francs——"

"And the Abbé's friend another hundred."

"I thank you, messieurs; two hundred francs, then."

"And another hundred for the excellent supper we have eaten. You must permit me to pay for that, Bordenave."

"Ah, monsieur, if I should object——?"

"Then there's the wine, Bordenave—would a hundred francs——"

"Blessed saints!—four hundred francs; and all for making Dover Harbour. You shall be there at three o'clock, messieurs. If you wish to go back again to-morrow, I will come and call for you. Four hundred francs—but I shall grow rich."

In this way was the compact made. I have no doubt at all that the grasping old rascal knew from that moment, at least, the plainer facts of our story, and the meaning of the rockets which Escalles had fired. An Englishman sought to escape from France and would not go by the packet boat. He offered four hundred francs for the passage. Very good; old Bordenave was quite willing to be corrupted. He rather liked it.

"Finish your wine at your ease, messieurs. I am going upstairs to whistle for a wind. If there are any more fireworks, I will tell you. The Abbé's friend may wish to lie down—eh, monsieur? You would not have all the people see you on deck?"

"As you please, Bordenave. But I am very tired to-night."

"Then you shall sleep, monsieur. I will call you when I make the quay. Four hundred francs! *Mon Dieu!* you shall certainly see Dover."

He went away, and presently the pattering feet above our head spoke of business on deck and the changing of the sails. For my part, fatigue was telling upon me again; and that and the wine contrived an indolent state of mind wherein nothing is very real or very fearful to us. One anxiety alone

troubled me. I must be sure of Harry's friendship at Calais.

"I leave it to you, Harry, to bring Lepeletier to reason," I said. "There is no one else I could or would ask. You know that."

He smiled at my simplicity.

"Come," he said, "is it really Lepeletier about whom you are so anxious?"

"You will tell him just what I have told you—saving that which you call my imagination."

He was serious in an instant.

"Yes," he said; "it would be well to say nothing about that. When you are at Dover you can write and tell me how far you are justified or I am foolish."

And then he went on flippantly again—

"At Dublin, the Viceroy kisses all the *débutantes*, you know. I wonder if the custom holds in mere embassies. To-morrow, remember, I represent you at the court of Lepeletier. Really, my dear fellow, it should not be difficult where Mademoiselle Agnes is concerned."

It was my turn to be serious.

"Oh," said I, "I have done with that."

"Done with it? Hark to him. Done with the prettiest thing in France. Shame on you, my son! I will bring her to Cottesbrook myself before the month is out."

"I wish to God you could, Harry."

"Oh, but I shall. I am determined upon it. The place wants waking up, and she will do it. Does she ride, think you? Imagine the spleen of forty-

two dowagers who have daughters ready for you."

"They will be very angry, certainly."

"And your mother. I would give much to see the day when Lady Hilliard first kisses little Agnes Lepeletier."

"I would give half my fortune, Harry."

He had mentioned my mother's name, which I never hear but some picture of my childhood and of a mother's life is conjured up thereby and set for me in a frame of the past most precious. And now a picture came again as I lay resting on the cabin bench, and the swish of the seas we breasted was a sleep song. Cottesbrook, my home, with its pastures, its old-world people, its woods, its dells, its Abbey house—how far off it seemed! One face alone I missed from the house of my dreams—the face of her who had told me an hour ago that we should never meet again, that a gulf impassable was set between us. Would Agnes ever reign at Cottesbrook? Ay, God alone could answer that question. I could not lift the veil of the future which loomed so darkly. Dreaming, I saw my home; but the sun did not shine upon it, and there was darkness in the woods.

A troubled sleep I slept in that miserable cabin, but a sleep which left me refreshed when Harry waked me and cried me to go on deck with him. He was wearing oilskins then, and the lamp's wan light showed the dull, leaden drops of water upon his cape, and the pallor of the face which looked

down to mine. But I was still heavy with the dream, and did not understand him at the first.

"What is it? What do you say? Have I been asleep? Good Lord, what a fool!"

He gave me a hand from the bench and turned towards the companion.

"Old Bordenave is curious," he said. "A tug has followed the fishing fleet from Calais, and is searching some of the ships. You'd better come on deck, for it will be our turn soon."

I went up after him with leaden steps. It was no surprise to me. Reason had told me from the first that I must answer for the night in the citadel of Calais.

CHAPTER XIII

English Voices

I HAD thought that it was yet dark when Harry waked me ; but when we went up to the deck the greyer lights of dawn were in the west ; and eastward the sun came up above the waters as a ball of fire new kindled and mellow. All about us the lazy sea caught the morning's beams and tossed them in jewels of the spindrift. The coast of France was no longer white above our horizon. Dover herself, as a picture cut in stone, stood above the waters dominatingly, in silent, unwoke majesty, the very type of a fortress town. We were not a mile from the Admiralty Pier, not a mile from safety and the shore. The new harbour works shaped clear in the breaking rays of sunlight, and beyond them I could distinguish the big hotels, the ramparts of the Castle, St. Mary's Church as a nest upon the cliff side. In fifteen minutes, I said, we should have passed the harbour gates, for the tide served. Why, then, was old Bordenave curious?

"Yonder, Captain," he cried, "yonder is the Calais tug. Look for yourself. They have just

stopped *La Mouette*, and my friend Bécu. He would be two miles from here, perhaps. It will be our turn next, the Abbé says. Very well, if the Captain does not mind!"

An odd sensation came over me while he spoke. It was not altogether fear; it was not a sudden consciousness of danger. To-day I should call it excitement pure and simple—exactly the same sensation as comes to a man who waits for the start of a race in which he is a runner. Pursuit had dogged me all night as a shadow; but the morning sun brought it to the light. We played no longer in the dark.

"Are you sure of what you say, Bordenave?" I asked as quietly as I could. "Are there no steam-trawlers with your fleet?"

He put his hands deep into his pockets and puffed quickly at his pipe.

"Look here, Captain!" he exclaimed bluntly, "if you do not want to see your friends from Calais, I would say be off as quickly as you can."

We all laughed, in spite of ourselves, at his way of putting it, Harry louder than the rest of us.

"Where are your wings, Bordenave?" he cried now; "give the Captain a pair and he will fly to Dover. You say there is no wind?"

"Not enough to lift a flag, Abbé. Look at the sail yonder. Does that say wind?"

"But you could row me ashore in the dinghy!" I suggested.

Bordenave turned and looked me full in the face.

"They are blind on the steamer, then, Captain?"

"You mean that they would be here before we could get ashore."

"They will be here in twenty minutes—less if you put a boat out. Do not trust them, Captain, they have good eyes."

Harry stamped his foot.

"Then, in Heaven's name, how is the man to get ashore?"

"Messieurs," replied the skipper with some difficulty, "I have done my best."

We fell to silence and to watching the distant ships. Dawn found the sea as a lake; the hour of slack water was nearly done, I imagined. Two miles away or more, towards the cliffs of France, a tug lay near a French smack, and had put out a boat to board her. I realised that in ten minutes the same boat might be hailing the *Hirondelle*.

"Harry," I said, turning to him with the sure knowledge that he could not help me, "I must get ashore somehow."

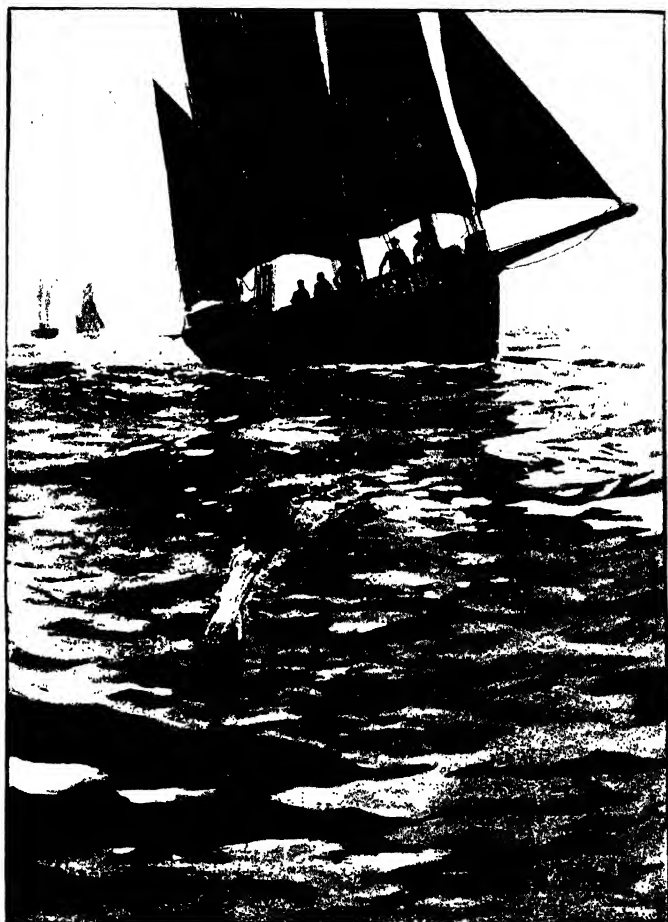
"I agree," he answered gravely.

"The longer we wait, the greater the chance for those fellows to understand."

"There is only one way, Alfred."

"I am going to take it, Harry."

He wrung my hand, but said nothing. My fur coat lay on the deck now, and my boots were quickly beside it. The French crew watched me with an amazed silence which was eloquent of their thoughts. Already the smoke from the tug's funnel



"I began to work strongly for the Admiralty Pier."

Peter Porter

drifted from the hither sea and began to shut out the view of the smack and the boat. There was no time to lose. I stood up in my vest and drawers, and rolling my lighter clothes in a bundle, I tied them round my neck. Even then I could remember my sovereign-purse and the case which held my money. I should have need of them ashore.

"I must get to Dover, Harry."

"God bless you, old fellow! but it's worth trying."

"You will see Agnes to-morrow?"

"Of course I shall."

"Tell her that I remember my promise."

"Monsieur, monsieur, the tug is moving again."

Old Bordenave spoke. I did not look behind me, and without another word to them dived into the sea. There was only one idea in my mind. At any cost I must reach Dover Harbour—the shores of my own country.

I had plunged well away from the stern of the smack; and was so sheltered by it that I accounted myself safe, at least for the moment, from any observation by those upon the tug. The sea struck cold as ice upon the head, but the first vigorous strokes sent the warping blood through my veins; and turning upon my side I began to work strongly for the Admiralty Pier. I remember well that I consoled myself from the first with the assurance that the pier was not a mile away, and that I had swum a mile many a time in the great lake at Cottesbrook. From the smack's deck I could distinguish the very porters waiting by the morning train for

the packet boat from Calais. Those fellows would be astonished when a half-naked man came up to their carriages, I said. And I should find myself ashore with a pair of soaked flannels and a flannel coat weighing any number of wet pounds; but it would be upon the shore of England, and to-morrow my work would begin. Subtly and calmly my mind was busy already with the great uncertainty. I could think of twenty things then; but of those behind me I would not think. All that Harry had said was said by me again and again. If I had been the victim of imagination—very well, my escapade could hurt no one. If, on the other hand, I had learned a truth so great that I feared to speak of it even to my oldest friend—why, then I was a thousand times justified of that which I did. The very doubt helped my resolution. I was not a mile from England; and in England I had a great work to do. Never did man swim in the sea for a stake so terrible or for a shore so dear.

The sea was calm, a great lake rolling lazily in the sun of the morning. From the smack's deck I had seen the houses of Dover as in some mighty scene of a play; but now, from the level of the water, they appeared a great way off, as though a hand had rolled them back for my despair, and set a greater gulf between the swimmer and the shore. I knew that my deceptive vision tricked me, and took no thought of it, but only of that which lay behind me, and of the tug, which I began to remember when the first energy of flight had passed.

Had I been observed by the Frenchmen, or did old Bordenave's boat still shield me? Once as I turned upon my back to breathe, I beheld the still sea behind me and the smack hove to, and beyond it the squat steamer with smoke pouring from its twin funnels and crests of foam at its bows. Doubt was possible no longer. The tug was making for the *Hirondelle*, and in ten minutes a boat from it would follow me.

I rested but an instant, and then was upon my side again.

It is one thing to swim at leisure, for the love of it, knowing that you may turn to the shore or the depths at your will; it is another matter to swim for your liberty, if not for your life. I had set out from the ship thinking that I had a child's task before me; but the half of a mile taught me the lesson, and for a little while a despair, almost as of death, settled upon me. Seas which had been gentle as the touch of flowers upon the lips now began to buffet me with stinging slaps. I sank lower in the water and came up again with difficulty. The sky, grey and cold of morning, seemed far above me. I could no longer distinguish Dover, for the salt stung and burned my eyes; and all about me was the grey, green swell, pitiless, infinite, torturing. Was it ordained that I must die there, I asked—die when my voice could be heard in England and her white cliffs might almost cover me with their shadows. And yet of death I thought less than of the tug steaming there in my wake,

one mile, two it might be, from the place where I lay. How far was she behind me now? God, how my strength seemed to fail me! I must rest, must breathe—they might take me if they willed. It would be a relief, I said, to sink down, down, and to sleep in the eternal silence of the depths.

Some one halloed across the sea, and I thought that I recognised the voice of Harry, and that he warned me of the tug's approach. Once I heard a siren blasted, and then the whistle of an engine, curiously near to me. I had been swimming the breast stroke when the voice came floating over the waters; but now I sank down until my head was almost submerged, and so looked backward at the ship and the men. Bordenave's boat still lay there, perhaps three-quarters of a mile from me, and the tug was near by it apparently hailing it and sending out a boat again.

But that which brought all my courage back as upon a beam of light was the spectacle of Dover herself, so near to me, so clear in the vigour of the day that I had but to swim a hundred strokes to make its harbour safely. What tide there was appeared to help me to the great buttress of the pier. I perceived it all so plainly in the pleasing mellow glow of dawn, the lapping waves, the men upon the jetty, the white houses beyond, the waiting train, with a shimmer of steam above the engine's funnel. But a little river of grey, green water stood between us; and so gentle a river that it seemed to sport and play as a human thing waking

to greet the rising sun. I said, when I beheld it, that nothing could stand now between me and my victory; and, roused at the siren's call as by a clarion note, I struck out for the shore again with a measure of strength which amazed me.

Three hundred yards to go, perhaps—three hundred yards for liberty and a prize of liberty beyond my words. God knows, my heart beat as every stroke carried me a little way to that giant pier whereof the very stones rewarded my exhausted eyes. None would pursue me now, I said, or, pursuing, must answer English voices and an English law. Odd, indeed, it was that no one observed the swimmer from the shore; but who would have looked for him in such a place and at such an hour? Alone I swam; alone I passed through those phases of hope and fear, of joy and despair, which such a scene could not fail to create for me. None followed, I said. Oh, amazing confidence! for, saying it, I heard the steamer's paddles beating the water, and I knew that she pursued me. She was coming on, then, into the very mouth of the harbour!

For one unforgettable moment I ceased to swim and listened to the echoes. Let those who have been in the water remember the throb of a steamer's paddle as it smites the seas and tumbles them backward in eddies of rushing foam. What a sound it is, mysterious as the rolling thunder from the depths, reverberating, tremulous, making the waters tremble and the swell ripple even upon the distant shore.

And now I had the echo of it throbbing in my ears ; the waves seemed to flush as at some foreign power ; I could feel by instinct that a ship was behind me, that it raced up toward me, that I might even be drawn down by its swell as in a whirlpool. The knowledge was torture—torture beyond all power of writing. I had dared so much to win so little. It would be a humiliation surpassing words to be taken here, when but two hundred yards lay between me and my liberty ; and yet taken I should be unless a miracle prevailed. To this thought of capture I began, indeed, to surrender, when every stroke of mine was answered by a louder, more thunderous echo of the steamer's paddles. She was a hundred, fifty yards away, I said. The voices of those hailing me came clear and distinct across the gathering seas. Oh, wonderful to tell ! They were English voices.

Dazed to the point of unconsciousness, worn out as much by excitement as by fatigue, I sank lower in the sea and waited for the end. The beat of the steamer's paddles had ceased by this time, and in their place I could hear the splash of oars and a steady word of command. Again, I say, it was an English voice which spoke—the mockery of it!—an English voice upon the Calais tug. But I had no longer the strength or the will to resist the man who hailed me. He lifted me as a child from the sea to his boat ; and as a child I lay half senseless while they rowed me to the steamer.

To the steamer, indeed, to a big ship where many

crowded about me, and strange faces peered into mine, and a man with a gold-laced cap brought me a glass of brandy, and others rolled me in blankets to carry me to the cabin below. With wonder-struck eyes I looked at the officer and at those who helped him. The trim jerseys, the name upon their caps, above all (and my hand well may hasten to set that down)—above all, the English faces. Great God! I asked, where was I? What did I mean? Whose ship was this?

Laugh with me you who read. I had been picked up by the morning boat from Calais, and before another hour was struck by the harbour clock I walked, a free man, in the streets of Dover.

END OF BOOK I.

BOOK II
THE PATRIOT

CHAPTER XIV

In which I have a Letter from the Abbé Fordham

I HAVE heard it said by one who has studied the whole art of living and still accounts himself a pupil, that of all the hours to be named for excellence and the simpler satisfactions of life, the breakfast hour in a country house is to be surpassed by none. An institution, admittedly (for such tradition made it long ago), it is, in its way, as sacred as *The Times* or *Punch*, or any other hallowed necessity of the English day. Nor do I know any other hour in the twenty-four which seems to teach so quickly the mere joy of existence, both intimate to us and universal in the greater world of Nature. There is no rose that smells as sweet as the first rose we pluck when the gong is calling "Breakfast." There is no sunshine, no air so invigorating as the light and the breeze to which we open our windows when morning wakes us. The very leaves drip then with the dewy draughts of life; the air shimmers in the radiating freshness of the day. A thousand notes of Nature's music are attuned in the woods and gardens of the house. The perfume of the

blossoms rises up as the breath of living flowers. There is laughter in the very voices which wake the thickets from their sleep.

At Cottesbrook, my home, I am ever early to be abroad and about the purlieus of the house, for Nature has a thousand charms of these busy hours for me ; and in retreat with her it is good to look out upon the press of life we have left, the gas-lit arena of the heated city, the confines of intrigue and pettiness—even, it may be, at the follies from which we rest and the follies from which we flee. In the woods and the gardens, with our horses in the stables, among our roses of the terrace we find a solitude which no other path may reach, no other scene make so welcome. For every bud we touch is a subject of our dominion, every living thing that comes out to greet us gladly owns our sovereignty. The very stones are full of stories—the stories, perchance, of those who walked as we are walking in the shadow of their homes ; of those who lived and wrought that all this might be ours ; whose voices still speak to us from every battlement and every tower—the voice of the fathers whose spirits watch and wait for the sons they have left. And to these shall we answer in the Judgment, to these who said, “Serve as we have served, in honour and fidelity.”

The morning hour was my hour, indeed, at Cottesbrook, and come winter, come summer, the habit of it knew no change. Early from my bed, a gallop across the park sent the blood singing through the

veins as though a man were new-born in energy and health. There were dogs to leap to my shoulder; horses to whinny when they heard my step; roses of spring or roses of autumn ready to my hand; above all, my mother's greeting, that dulcet, musical voice whose note shall never be forgotten nor rest uncalled-for in my memory.

Whatever the number of our guests, friends or strangers, young or old, the day was rare when I did not find myself alone for a moment looking upon that beloved face or listening to those unforgotten words before the less intimate life of day began, and all the superficialities must turn us to others. Ever, I remember, she would cross the lawn to me with my letters in her hand, and the love of childhood in her anxious eyes, and the sunshine upon her silvered hair for glory of her motherhood. No need to tell her if I were well or ailing. She read me as an open book, whose pages had been blotted by many a tear, whose lines were sacred because the hand of him she loved had written them. And I, in my place, could find but one word of morning for her—"Mother." She asked no other.

Many of these golden hours, some of sorrow, but more, ay, many more, of joy, I recall as this picture of my home comes back to me; and for a little while I forget why I speak of it, and why time may mist it for my eyes. Twenty summers could I name where no word or deed had come between those players of the garden to mute the lips of one and to light anxieties in the eyes of the other.

Yet such a day was known, and to it this record now must turn.

I had been six weeks out of France, six weary weeks of doubt and waiting, of idle conjecture and childish resolution. Every morning my mother would cross the lawn to me, my letters in her trembling hand; every day her unspoken question was unanswered. "I was unwell?" "No." "There was some anxiety about Harry?" "Not in the least; the Abbé Fordham was still in Switzerland." "It could not be that money troubled me?" "Oh, my dear mother, are we not rich enough?" "Then I needed a change—my accident must not be forgotten." I promised not to forget it. I might even join Harry in Switzerland, I said—and content with that we would go into the house together, my mother and I, hand in hand.

I would join Harry in Switzerland! God knows how gladly I had done so; but a hand of instinct held me to my country as to a duty which none other might fulfil. Six weeks had I been in England, and six times had those chosen friends who heard me, laughed at the story which I came to tell. At the War Office in Pall Mall, at the commanding officer's house in Dover, with my oldest friend in the privacy of clubs, the same incredulity met me. I had been frightened at Escalles, men said, and had conjured up the phantom for myself. Engineers shook their heads and protested, "Such a scheme could only be possible with the consent of our authorities at Dover." Generals

argued at length that the Intelligence Department would know of such a plot four-and-twenty hours after it was hatched. More practical people asked, "Well, why not go to Dover, and see if there is any evidence that such a thing is possible." I admitted to them that I had been and had seen nothing; and they would hear no more. When my back was turned, I knew that they pointed the finger and said, "There is the man." Nor to this hour can I tell you why my own conviction remained unshaken, nor why I said, "I believe; time will justify me." Before the world I am justified to-day; but the world will never know what the justification cost me.

In silence I carried my secret, then, as some precious possession which others might not share. Harry, it is true, wrote to me every week a long letter of jest and hope and consolation; but not a word of Agnes since he had quitted Calais, exactly a month ago. I remember well the morning when my mother carried to me the note in which he told me finally that his mission was fruitless, and that time alone could consummate my wishes. "Frankly," he had written, "I cannot understand Lepeletier. He has changed beyond recognition. There seems to have been a latent hostility to England and Englishmen, which has been aroused now in his old age, and burns with an ardour which is astounding. I have risen to Ciceronian heights, my dear Alfred, but in vain. He will neither see you nor hear of you. There is in his head the perverse notion that you have played with his honour and

have tarnished it. Laughter, argument, reason—he will have none of them, neither from myself, nor from a better advocate, whose name is spelled with an A, and whose fidelity to a certain young officer of Hussars is beyond reproach. Patience, old friend. What says the excellent Boethius? ‘*Major lex amor est sibi.*’ Time alone is our friend. We will pass Time until he shall please to hold out his hand and to tuck away that old scythe where it cannot cut us. I am going to Switzerland to-day. But in a month I pass through Calais again—‘and then!’ as the villain says in the melodrama. So keep up your heart, old fellow, and forget all about your great secret, for I am as sure of the wrong-headedness of it as I am of the sunshine.”

I read the letter through and put it away in my case, as some deed of my destiny which, perchance, I might look upon with clearer eyes when time had worn it as a parchment and all the faded story proved but a forgotten history. To my mother I said nothing, save that Harry was well and in Switzerland, and that he sent me poor news of my friends in Calais. If she guessed what lay behind, if a woman's intuition made no secret of that which I would tell to none, my love for Agnes Lepeletier, she judged in her wisdom not to speak of it, but by other means to divert the brooding trouble of my thoughts. During the month that followed upon the letter, Cottesbrook opened its darkened rooms and waked its halls and galleries to fresh young voices and all the busy idleness of summer. Brother

officers, buoyant with a hope of South Africa, friends of Meg, my boisterous little sister, relations whose chief merit was their chatter, any one who, to use my mother's words, "was bright," came to Northamptonshire in that month of July and helped the picnic there. Tennis-parties, the solemn pursuit of the golf ball, *al fresco* delights of the woods, masques, comedies—the cure was terrifying in its magnitude. And it left me with my malady untamed. The forced inaction, the very attempt at self-assurance, the burden of the doubt became nigh intolerable. There were days when I could say that I would return to Calais and demand an interview of Lepeletier; other days when all the story which Agnes and I had told seemed far off, as a vision of my youth, distant and soon to be absorbed in a newer activity of life. And then in an hour the truth stood out again as in a forbidding image I might not pass. For Harry wrote that he was coming home again and that he had news for me. The sun never shone so bright on Cottesbrook as it shone that day.

My mother carried the letter through the gardens, and, finding me in an arbour by the orangery, she sat a moment to watch me read it and to wait again, as often she had waited vainly for the untold story of my secret. From the distant house there came the echo of girlish laughter and the deeper notes of men's voices. We sat in a glade of the old trees, and beyond them could look out upon the golden corn-lands of my home, and all those ripe, green

pastures, those sleeping woods my father's feet had trod. I know not what it was of the hour or the scene that touched some responsive chord in my heart, and seemed to release my tongue and to nerve my voice, so that there, as a child which sought the gentler hand, I told my mother of Agnes, and spoke of all that I had lost and nevermore might win. Alone there, she and I, with the distant voices in our ears, and the beauty of our home all set about us as in a shimmer of the golden day, she heard me and answered, mother to son, in gladness of her knowledge. And from that hour she carried my burden with me, in the strong arms of her love, so that I forgot almost that I had ever worn it so heavily or made complaint of it.

"You will bring her to Cottesbrook? You will bring her soon, Alfred?"

"If that may be, mother."

"It shall be; I will pray for it. She will be worthy of my boy. And I shall see her. She is very beautiful, Alfred?"

"There is none beautiful except my mother."

"Ah! you say so, my dearest. But she will come to Cottesbrook; I shall see her soon—this week, this month. She will love me, Alfred as I shall love my dear son's wife."

"She will love you as I, mother."

"I ask nothing more of God than that I may see her soon."

There is no gladness such as this, the unselfish gladness for a son's sake; and if we two sat long

there in the arbour on that sunny morning, make sure that something of my mother's hope and joy had been shared by me to lift the looming curtain of my future and to give me courage of it. All, indeed, I might not tell her, but who could be sure that to-morrow the right would not be mine—the right even to return to Calais, and to laugh at my phantoms and to say to Agnes, "My mother is waiting for you at Cottesbrook"? For Harry was coming home and had news for me. He would be at the station that very afternoon. I should see him, hear him, know the best and the worst. There was no lighter-hearted man in all Northamptonshire that day than he who drove to meet the "Abbé Fordham" upon the road to Harborough.

For Harry had been in Calais town, and but yesterday had seen Agnes Lepeletier. Thrice happy being who knew so little of his happiness.

CHAPTER XV

A Lesson in Dreams

I MADE out from Harry's letter that he would pass the night in London, and come on to Market Harborough by the dismal afternoon train from Kettering, which never but once was punctual, they say, and then at the cost of a station-master's reason. Impatience sent my horses at a canter to a rendezvous so well desired. It were as though Harry could bridge in a moment the intolerable weeks of waiting I had spent at Cottesbrook. With him I might go back to that unforgotten day when I leaped from the deck of the *Hirondelle*, and the packet boat brought me to Dover Pier.

A thousand things I must hear from Harry's lips, must ask him a thousand questions. Do you wonder that I paced the deserted platform as a prisoner awaiting liberty? Would that cursed train never be signalled? Should I never hear the message that Agnes had sent? It was a delay intolerable, not to be suffered, beyond the malignity even of a railway company.

He came at last, boisterous, bronzed, the laughing,

active Harry of old; for an instant we exchanged a hand-grip as of men who meet gladly in some good crisis of their lives, but will not speak of it yet awhile. Upon my part, the excitement of that moment sent me hither and thither, now after his trunks, now gathering up his rugs, now hurrying the grooms, as one all impatient to drag him from the press and to have him with me in the carriage, where no trunk-hunters might hear us, nor gaping rustics listen. Yesterday he had seen Agnes, and here at Market Harborough could begin to speak of other subjects. Well, it was the old Harry, after all.

I captured my prize and took him with me to the mail-phaeton, and so to the dusty, deserted high-road by which you come to Cottesbrook. He wore a round felt hat now, and had tucked his old Scotch cap in the pocket of his cape. His face was so scarred and bronzed by the suns of Switzerland that he might have come from Africa.

But the old Harry spoke, the old Harry who seemed to change the very scene about us, to lift the clouds from it and bring the light again.

"There's no going home to-night, Harry—you dine and sleep at the Abbey. That's decided."

He leant back in the phaeton and clasped his hands.

"Behold," he said, "the parson of Cottesbrook, who is asked to the loaves and fishes, and who disgraces the Cloth by unnatural hesitation."

"But Meg wishes it. She won't forgive me."

His face softened as it always did at the mention of my sister's name.

"Who am I, to say 'No' to your sister Meg, Sir Alfred?"

"Agreed. We've a full house and a supply of bores to people Pretoria. Do you remember old Arthur Grosvenor, the little General who was recently in command at Canterbury?"

"The man with whiskers and a story of his mother's aunt who was carried to a harem at Teheran! Say not that he still lives."

"He does. We've been treated to the excellent lady three times since Sunday. What is to be done to a man with one story?"

"Tell him another."

"He doesn't listen."

"Then present him with a standard work on harems and pay his passage to Teheran."

"A good notion; but I shall have something else to think of now. Why don't you gratify my curiosity. You know what I am thinking of."

I did not look at him, but my hand faltered on the reins while I waited for his answer, and the horses swerved badly.

"I know what you are thinking of, old chap, but I have nothing to tell."

"Nothing to tell—you?"

"At least, it's told in a word. Lepeletier has closed his house at Calais and gone away."

"Gone away. Where's he gone to?"

"Ah, read me the riddle aright. The story in

Calais is that he has gone to Chalons. I followed, and found it was a lie. He has never been in Chalons. *Verbum sap.* They don't wish us to know where he is."

I was silent for a little while. The dusty road now appeared suddenly to be enveloped by the twilight. The friend at my side had nothing more to say.

"And Agnes," I exclaimed presently, "she is with her father?"

"The liars of Calais say so. I imagine that they tell the truth because it serves as well as the other thing. Obviously, the man who cannot find the father cannot find the daughter. They sent me to Chalons on a fool's errand, and were indignant because I would not go to Dijon on a second. The empty house, moreover, has no secrets. There is only a dog in it."

I laughed in spite of my chagrin; but he began to question me as though to turn my thoughts.

"Has Agnes written to you since your return?"

"Not a line."

"Her father?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"So! A silent man and a mystery. Well, you cannot argue with a fellow who says nothing. Did you write to him yourself?"

"A letter as long as a sermon."

"Frank, of course?"

"Brutally frank. I said that I had seen things

at Escalles which he could explain in a word. He has not condescended to explain them."

"Not being at Calais, he might well avoid the question. You have forgiven my incredulity, I hope?"

"I never blamed it. I am incredulous myself—a man who does not wish to believe what his eyes showed him. If any one listened to me, I should be the most astonished man in Europe."

"But you have found listeners. You said in one letter that you had seen the War Office people."

"Quite true. I told them the whole story without a jot or tittle of ornament or addition. They were polite, but impossible. The man who showed me out said, "There goes a lunatic," as plainly as you can say a thing without words. Kent, at Dover, the man in command, laughed like a clown; he insisted on walking to Folkestone with me to cure the delusion. We saw nothing, of course."

"You wouldn't. I tramped those seven miles yesterday, and was rewarded with two tunnels, a coastguard station, old Watkins's rubbish heap, and a pair of chalky boots."

"Do you mean to say that you are really sufficiently interested to walk seven miles?"

I turned to look at him as I asked the question, and the expression on his face astonished me. It had become in an instant the face of a man who wrestled with some problem. His eyes were wide open and strangely serious. One of his hands gripped my forearm in an iron grip. All the

fascination of my own fear had found another victim.

"Interested, Alfred? Great God! how many nights have I dreamed of it all since we parted! Your woebegone self by the Jardin Richelieu, those minutes in the hotel, the morning on the smack! Do you know that I nearly fell in a faint when the steamer picked you up? We shall never see a race like that again, my son. The Frenchmen would have taken you in another hundred yards. I began to breathe when I saw the others haul you up. And I think that in the same moment I began to believe."

"Why so?"

"Common sense. If there had been nothing to see at Escalles, why did the heathen rage furiously because you had seen it? You were evidently a prize worth catching. I put two and two together and made it four—three Frenchmen in a boat and an Englishman in the water. When I returned to Calais the police were impertinent enough to search my luggage, and Lepeletier was distant. Made-moiselle Agnes, I believe, went to Paris the next day; I never saw her again. But to the police I said, 'We, Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoigne Cecil, Marquess of Salisbury——' and they listened."

"While you went on to Switzerland."

"Exactly; to dream of things I haven't the courage to speak of. Oh, my dear chap, just think of it. If the hundredth chance were true, and those fellows, those burrowing animals were this very

hour creeping, creeping under the sea to Dover, while England says nothing but 'Holidays,' and you and I are driving along a dusty road to Cottesbrook ! I say, 'If it were true.' Do you know, my son, that I wake in the night as cold as a dead man because you have taught me how to dream ?"

"As we must teach each other how to wake, Harry."

"A thousand times agreed. Show me how to break your own bonds, and I will begin to live again. Frankly, I cannot master it. No amount of argument convinces me that the people of Calais would have done as they did just to punish a man who had seen a coal-shaft. What the truth is, God knows."

"And will help us to discover."

For a little while he sat in silence, as though, in truth, he saw again the thing that I had seen a hundred times since I came home to Cottesbrook and sought to forget in my mother's house.

"Whatever the truth is, I will know it," I said presently, "even if I spend half my fortune. Yesterday I resigned my commission in the Eighteenth. I shall spend next month at Dover—for the mere satisfaction of being there."

He did not protest, but heard me with new interest.

"You will need a chaplain, of course ?"

"If that chaplain is the vicar of my parish."

"Well—there are my people——"

"And there is Meg, Harry."

In truth, I heard my sister's girlish laugh as we



"I beheld a man's face staring up at me."

Pro-Fatal

turned into the Abbey drive; but that and the question I had put to Harry were forgotten an instant later, when, in the very thickets about the lawn of the house, I beheld a man's face staring up at me so savagely, from a bush upon my right hand, that I reined the horses back upon their haunches and sat for a minute unable to say a word to any one.

"That fellow there, in the copse—who is he? where did he come from?"

One of the grooms sprang to the ground and rushed into the copse, trampling the bushes and breaking the boughs. When he came back he shook his head doubtingly.

"There's no one in there, sir. I've been right through."

"But I saw the man for myself."

"Shall I look again, sir?"

"Let the men come out and search the grounds, every yard of them. There was some one lurking about there when I spoke. He must be found."

I let the horses go and drove on to the house. Harry asked no questions. I did not tell him, until he came into my bedroom late that night, that the face I had seen in the thicket was the face of one of the engineers who passed me in the tunnel at Escalles.

CHAPTER XVI

Of Pistols and a Persian

MY mother was full of anxieties when she came down to breakfast next morning, for the grooms had been gossiping to the maids, and the maids to the men; and so the story of a stranger was sent the round until it came to the breakfast-table, and was a fine subject for little General Grosvenor, and a terror to certain young ladies, who expressed a wholesome fear of an early death if the unknown man should be daring enough to walk off with the spoons. But I, in the first hour of morning, had already quieted my mother's fears, pooh-poohing my own fancies and declaring that if any one lurked yesterday in the grounds, he was but a tramp from Harborough, and to-day would be in the casual ward at Kettering. She accepted the story reluctantly; but elsewhere it was a feast for our guests, who had divers remedies for burglars, and were agreed upon the daring courses they would shape if a strange man passed the doors of Cottesbrook. To me so much, to them so little, the incident meant. I seemed to be the unwilling spec-

tator in a jest-house, a man full of serious thoughts, who, nevertheless, must listen to the boastful quips of idlers and all the meaningless chatter of a common day. But I knew that one there with me shared the burden, and my courage had grown since Harry came home.

He was late at the table, and his freckled, healthy face lacked something of its colouring, of that honest pink and white which bore witness to the *mens sana* and was as natural to him as the blush of a rose. It was good to see my sister Meg's pretentious indifference when Harry said "Good-morning" to her, for she did not so much as raise her eyes to look at him; and yet I knew that there was no man in all England she would so soon have welcomed to her side; none I myself would have seen there with greater thankfulness. Whatever else of content that life may give us, surely an honest man's love for the sister we have guarded is of gifts most blessed. Here was a love-story of childhood's birth; it would go on, I said, as some kindly stream through the fair country of home and children to the distant sea of the eternal rest, and, as I believed, of the eternal happiness. How different from my own case! What future could I foresee, if it were not the enduring longing for the days I had lived in France? Whereto was the stream of my life carrying me, if not to hours of darkness and of the mind's distress? Six months ago they had spoken of me as a man fortunate beyond my fellows. I could laugh ironically at such

an estimate now. There is no mistress so perverse as destiny, none so merciless as we find her in the moods of her hostility.

Harry had exchanged a quick glance with me when we sat at table, and taking up his letters, which a groom had carried from the Rectory, he asked me to ride over with him after breakfast. Meg looked up reproachfully at the request, and was betrayed into her avowal.

"Don't say there's a funeral, Mr. Fordham. All Cambridge men tell that old story. Alf was as bad as the rest. I really thought at last that we ought to bury some one for the sake of being honest. How many times did your aunt die, Alf, when you were at Jesus'?"

"Six or seven, Meg. I was like the man in the book, and used to keep my grandmother for Derby Day. She always died on the eve of the great race."

"A common loss in my regiment," said the little General, fixing his eyeglass with a solemnity characteristic of him. "There is nothing new under the sun, sir, in religion, in law, in medicine, or in the arts of mendacity. Here has man been trying for a thousand years to fudge up a decent excuse for a dereliction of duty, and has got no farther than the death of his aunt. Astounding! Lamentable! Now, when my poor sister was persuaded to marry, at the age of forty-nine, a rascally Persian in Teheran, they had the impertinence to tell me she was dead. Dead, sir—a

woman who comes of a family which lives to ninety and has married at sixty-four."

Meg whispered to me that the Persian was properly punished; but Harry went on to chaff the General.

"It is astonishing," he exclaimed, "how little kindness the world shows to aunts. An aunt is always a jocular subject. If a man fozzles at golf, he does not say, 'Oh, my cousin, my brother, or my grandfather.' He says, 'Oh, my aunt!' Possibly, General, the Persian is equally deficient in the maternal instinct. He did not take your aunt seriously——"

"Oh," said Meg, "but he took her to his harem, didn't he, General? Wasn't that serious enough?"

The little General refused to laugh.

"She married a Persian, sir, a yellow fellow who wore black trousers and a fez. When he is tired of her he will take three more wives. They are always hanging over her head—I have told her so."

"Poor thing! Is she not very much shocked?"

"She is properly punished, young lady. The West does not touch the East and come away with clean fingers. Remember that—never marry a Persian. You may be an aunt some day, and will be more kind to the species."

"Horrible thought!" cried Meg, "to be an aunt and to be buried to make a Cambridge holiday."

My mother interposed with her more serious word.

"Must you really go to-day, Vicar?" she said. "Can't the parish wait a little while?"

Harry turned to me as though in explanation.

"Master Alfred rides with me," he answered quickly. "A man who has left his business for five weeks always protests ruin if you suggest that he should leave it for six. Here is my curate indiscreet enough to go and get engaged. If I do not go back and release him, he will be taking strange texts: 'By the waters of Cottesbrook we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee, O Jane.' I must really try the Vicarage bed to-night, Lady Hilliard——"

"And miss the burglar," interposed Meg audaciously. "Now, really, do you think there was a man?"

"Bosh!" said the little General contemptuously. "An umbrella's the thing for him, sir. I went through the Ashantee war with a duck suit and a gingham umbrella, and there wasn't a black who stood up to me. Don't talk to me about pistols——"

"No one mentions them, I think," said Harry.

"But you were going to, sir——"

"I beg your pardon, nothing of the sort."

"But you had them in your mind, sir."

"Not at all. If I met a burglar, I should recite the verses of a minor poet to him, in a major key. 'Silver and gold have I none,' and he would pass the plate. In that aspect we are men of the same

persuasion. I imagine his objection to buttons would not be less than my own."

The little General, who was never so happy as in the first words of a heated argument, resented Harry's refusal to oblige him with a measure of temper, and fell upon a dish of strawberries ravenously. It was always a "go-as-you-please" at Cottesbrook, especially at breakfast time; and the rest of us, fearing, perhaps, that there would be a resurrection of the indispensable aunt, strolled off to the stables and the gardens—Meg to cut a rose for Harry's coat, my mother to the housekeeper's room, I to the loose boxes where my hunters stood. My impatience to be away and off with Harry prevailed above any interest I could affect for everyday affairs. I admitted to myself, as a natural thing, that the old order of the life at home was unstable and changing. It could not be otherwise. No association, however potent, might recall that spirit of a boyhood which was lost to me when Agnes Lepcletier met me on the Calais road. I was as one who realized in a single hour the emptiness of life; who spanned the years and, looking for the first time onward to the eternal goal, could see the end and say, "The way is short." A mood, perchance a passing malady of the mind which time and change would cure; but while I suffered it I thought that it must endure to the end.

It was ever Harry's task to recall me from these gloomy paths, to share with me those bountiful spirits which neither doubt nor difficulty could

abate. And he did not fail me upon that sunny morning, when we mounted our cobs and cantered away across the fields, over hedges and ditches as they came, to the Vicarage in the hollow, and the warm welcome which awaited us there. Meg, it is true, argued at great length with him before we set out, upon so private a matter that they must needs go into the orangery to discuss it; but as soon as we were by the gates he fell to talk of the affair of yesterday and of the anxieties it had left to him. To me the opportunity of saying that which for many weeks I had thought in silence was as a tonic for the mind. The half of my responsibilities, and more, seemed, as at Calais, shifted to shoulders which could bear them better than my own. I knew that a strong man counselled me, a strong man and a brave man, and one to whom duty was the first and the last aim of life.

"Harry," I said, when at length we were alone, "don't you think it odd there is no news of the man we saw last night?"

"Odd? Why so? Did you suppose he would wait to ask after the family? Blessed simplicity! He is in France by this time. While your fellows were beating the bushes, I can hear him crying, '*A bas les Anglais!*' on the other side of the hedge. Remember, he was not twenty paces from the high road. And I pay you the compliment of supposing that you have forgotten the fable of the wolf. He was a flesh-and-blood man, you say? I am ready to believe you."

"Flattering, but unnecessary. I am as sure of it as of this old cob. There was a man in the copse, and I have seen him before—at Escalles, when I left Jeffery on the line. It remains to ask what he is doing at Cottesbrook and who sent him?"

"Supererogatory questions, my son. There are twenty reasons. For my part, commend me to the less hysterical, but keep a staff in my hand. Really, I think you would do well to be careful, old fellow. All this tells me, at least, that you have seen something at Calais which France does not wish us to understand. I think it is your duty to take care that a man in a bush does not make understanding impossible. Here is a case where you must return good for evil, and see you lay it on well. I don't think, if I were you, that I would be out on the road much after dark. It isn't good for the respiratory organs. What is more, when you go to Dover, don't proclaim it from the house-tops. You might even suggest—a *suggestio falsi*, from which I here absolve you—that your destination was Calais. If like cures like, then lies are a hundred times justified in this case. In short, I think very seriously of the whole business."

I knew that he did, had known it at Calais, and yesterday at Cottesbrook. It was a relief now to be able to speak freely and with none of those rigmaroles which I had been compelled to employ when explaining myself to others. View it as we might, hallucination or truth, the greatest plot one

nation ever contrived against another, or the mere vision of a dreamer, this fact stood impregnable—that two men upon a dusty Midland road believed that day in the work they were called to do for England, and resolved to do it with all the intellect which God had given them.

“I am glad you think seriously of it, Harry,” I said, when we had gone a little way silently. “After all, if I am telling but a fairy tale, why do the people at Calais trouble to send a man to spy me out here? Is not the very fact a new link in the chain we make? Would they trouble their heads if I had seen a common fort or a coal-shaft? What the man wants, Heaven knows, unless it is to be sure that I am still at Cottesbrook and not at Dover. Mind you, I don’t suppose for a minute that this is a question of to-morrow or the day after. If a tube be pushed under the Channel, they may rest content to leave it half a mile from Dover and to wait their own time for the final stroke which will bring them out upon our shores. Looking at the thing from an outsider’s point of view, I don’t understand, even now, where their chance of opening up such a tunnel lies. They cannot suppose that we are going to allow Frenchmen to begin to dig a hole on the Dover foreshore. The thing is not to be considered. If there is a clever way of doing it, I am not clever enough to understand it. But I mean to let our people know what is going on, and I shall not rest until I have the truth.”

"You will not rest, and you will not leave a good, thick stick at home—excellent resolutions. And I agree with you entirely as to the air of Dover. A couple of months there would do no man any harm. There's golf on the Downs, decent bathing, and plenty of fair roads for a stink-pot. You'll get the East Kent foxhounds, too, later on."

"And the best of parsons to preach to me on Sundays."

Harry shook his head.

"Flying visits, my son. Look at the parish yonder. It is my kingdom. If I can bring a little joy, even to one poor soul there, how can I justify myself if I lay down the sceptre? But I'll come when I can, and I'll be with you always in heart. Yours is the work, old friend. We must leave the field of it to God. And the cost we must not think of—it is a debt we owe to our country. Even yet that work may reward us beyond our hopes."

He put his horse to a canter, as though he had no wish to pursue that new phase of the subject, and I followed him in consenting silence to the village and the Rectory house. For I knew that he spoke of Agnes, of his own fruitless embassy, and of the hope he had abandoned when he went to Calais town. Nevermore, he would have said, must such a hope come into my own life to be the impulse of it. The price of loss was a price to be paid without complaint for the honour of my

country, and, it might be—who could say?—for her very salvation. Nevertheless, from all the changing problems of the hour that mystery was not to be shut out. Consent as I might to the sacrifice, the face of the woman I loved looked out at me from that mirror of the past, and held me, a prisoner of the will, before her picture. In vain I said that it was ended and forgotten, that the glass of the past was shattered, that the future had nothing for me of all her store of love and content and the harvest of a life. Hope unconquered tempted me still. “It might be”—my right to say that remained a precious possession. I would say it though all the world forbade.

I was not born a pessimist, in truth, and no pessimist rode away from the Vicarage that afternoon, when, leaving Harry at the church door, I turned my horse's head and struck upon the high road to Harborough and my home. Desire of the future, unaltered desire born of a woman's sympathy, went with me upon my way, and, wonder working always, brought me face to face with her I would have gone a thousand miles to see—Agnes herself, driving in a carriage to the Abbey gates.

CHAPTER XVII

Agnes Comes to Cottesbrook

OUR greatest surprises are not always of the unexpected things, but rather of those we have looked for but have not dared to believe in. So often had I, in the idle pleasure of imagination, depicted that very scene—my own home and the little French girl driving to its gates—that now, when the dream came true and imagination was justified of the day, I could have laughed aloud for very irony of the circumstances. Twenty possibilities of the mystery I would have promised at the hazard; but Agnes, herself, in the shadow of the Abbey—Agnes, herself, going to my mother as I had wished it, ay, countless nights since they hunted me from Calais town—what book would have dared such a turn of fortune as that? No tale that I could think of surpassed the wonders of that day. She was there at the gates of my house! She had come from France to see me—the very last messenger I had looked for in a hundred years.

I saw her first at the junction of the roads, by

the spinney which is the outer rampart of the Abbey; and coming upon the carriage suddenly, and observing it carelessly, I should have passed it at a trot but for a little startled cry and the sound of a voice which quickened my heart and sent me back in the saddle as though a pit yawned at my very feet. Astonished in his turn, the flyman (for it was but a hired fly from Kettering) cried "Whoa!" to his old horse, who needed no reining; and there we sat, the three of us—two travel-stained, weary passengers, the third as astonished a man as ever rode a patient cob.

"Agnes? It can't be!"

She was very tired; the dust had soiled her pretty French dress and powdered the feathers of her dainty hat; but she raised a smiling face to mine and answered me bravely.

"Is it impossible, then, Captain Alfred?"

"It is astonishing to the last point of wonder. You were going to the Abbey, of course?"

She answered me as frankly.

"Yes, I was going to the Abbey to see Lady Hilliard, if I could."

"The greater surprise!"

"Lady Hilliard, if I could; if not, then to ask for you."

I was silent a moment to think of it. She had come to see my mother. Why, why, why? There must be the gravest reason.

"Well," said I, "here is a fellow has the good or the bad fortune to spoil your plans. Will you walk

up to the house with me? I will take you to my mother, Agnes."

She did not respond, but obeyed without protest when I opened the door of the fly and helped her down to the dusty road. The man went on to the stables readily. He knew the Abbey kitchens.

"Have something to eat and then go back," I said to him, and asked, "You are from Kettering, are you not?"

"I thank you, Captain, from John Cobb's."

"We shall not want you again to-day. Go back when your horse is rested. It's a long drive, remember."

He assented at once, but his little passenger protested.

"Oh, no, no, you do not understand; my friends expect me in London to-night. I dare not disappoint them."

"Then we shall drive you to the station ourselves. It will be something for a couple of lazy men to do. Let us talk about it as we go."

I drew the reins across my arm and opened the spinney gate. There was a bridle-path there leading to the orangery and the Italian gardens. The cob followed us as we went up, like a dog, patiently, but welcoming our many halting-places and the grass he found there. For my part, the surprise of it all was still almost paralysing. I knew not what to say or think. The hour seemed to carry me back magically to Calais and the Jardin

Richelieu. Agnes had come to me from the ends of the earth, I said.

"I can't believe it—can't believe that it's true," I cried again and again, as I took her hand in mine and set out for the house with slow steps. "There are some days so good that they find us incredulous. To-day is one of them. Is it really you, Agnes, or am I dreaming it all?"

She did not withdraw her hand from mine, but told me all her story, simply and without ornament, as was her wont.

"I came to you, Alfred, because I could not trust any one else to come. When you left us in Calais I did not believe that I should ever see you again; but a woman's pride is not strong enough to conquer a woman's fear, and so I came. My father is at Escalles now, in the works there; I have been living in Paris with my Uncle Jules. A week ago one of the engineers, a friend at Calais, wrote a letter which brought me to London yesterday. I came to warn you that you have enemies in England. Oh, it is true, believe me; they have never forgiven you for what you saw that night; they never will. I know them so well. They think that you have become the enemy of France, and they will not rest until you are powerless to harm them. That is why I am in England to-day, to save my father's honour and your life. You were our guest, our friend; there is so much that we owe to you. Is it not terrible to think that one day may change



"I came to you, Alfred, because I could not trust anyone else to come."

lives unalterably, eternally perhaps, for who can say? I have lost all that I lived for since those old days in Calais. I believe, sometimes, that I have even lost my faith."

I heard her without surprise, for I had guessed much of this; and now, drawing her closer to me, I answered her gratefully.

"You will never lose your faith, Agnes. You are too good for that. If a man allows much to a woman's heart, be sure that Providence allows more. Let us think it all over and try if we cannot find a way. As for my friends at Calais, who want to hear the last of me, well, don't trouble about them at all. I shall keep my eyes open and see nothing but their backs, believe me. The really serious thing is your father's distrust. Have you ever reflected how many troubles in life come to us for the lack of two minutes' plain talk with a man who misunderstands us? We might go arm in arm with him to the end of our days if we could but say, 'It is so and so.' But the opportunity is denied us, and then when the man dies we say, 'There is a poor fellow who makes one enemy the less in the world.' Why should that opportunity be denied to me in your father's case? He knows that I entered the forts by mistake. He knows that Jeffery took me there to pay off an old score. Why should I not go to him and say, 'It is all a misunderstanding; you have really nothing to charge against me. Let us forget it all and begin again'? Does not common

sense point that road? I'm sure that it does. I feel already that we are coming out into the light."

She listened patiently while I spoke, and then, drawing me back, she stopped to answer me, leaving a new picture of her in my mind, a picture set in a frame of silver birches and ash and laburnum, carpeted with the rich brown loam of summer, breathing an atmosphere of tremulous leaves and woodland solitude, and casting up to me a little white face with two dark blue eyes and such a look of love and fear and pity, that all my impulse was to take her in my arms and say, "Let us blot the page for ever; let the dead past bury its dead; here in the garden of England let us live and rest, as though yesterday had never been." But I knew that she would not hear that voice of persuasion which appeals to the imagination and not to the reason. Her relentless logic had always baffled, nay, sometimes angered me; for how should such a fragile thing remain so obstinate?

"Alfred," she said slowly, as one speaking a weighty decree, "you must not go to my father——"

"Must not go?"

"I say it as you have said it. Is there no honour, no duty left in the world? Do you owe nothing to your country?"

I was silent as one who had been struck a blow upon the mouth.

A great gulf seemed to open between us as we

stood. Her face, so near to mine an instant ago, was now as a face afar off. What had she said? what had she told me?

"No," she continued quietly, "you must not see my father, and I must see you no more. If honour keeps you in England, it sends me to France to-morrow. Oh, think, think, what children of circumstance we are—wishing so much, hoping so much, meeting a few short months ago when we might so easily have passed each other by—that we come to this, to choose between those we love and those we serve, our affections or our countries. I try to tell myself that it is not so, but I know that the truth is otherwise. The light that is coming into your life will be darkness for me—it is written so, a woman's tears will never wash out a page of fate, for fate has no heart. Let us accept it as those who love; let us at least be true to ourselves."

"And, being true, shall we say that an accident costing your country nothing, and of no concern to mine, is to merit this great penalty?"

She turned questioning eyes upon me. I am sure that she read the words in all their deeper meaning.

"Would you tempt my honour?" she asked almost in anger. "Are not my lips sealed? If there is a debt for you, is there not one for me also? You know that there is; you know that you have not the right to question me."

I flinched at the words, for every one of them

was a new light, a new meaning upon her confession. The woman I loved was ignorant no longer. I did not dare to ask how far her knowledge went.

"I am wrong to ask, Agnes," was my response. "I will never ask you again. But I would give half the years of my life not to have heard the things you tell me."

"As I would give all my life if another could bear my father's burdens."

"At least you tell me that it is no choice of his."

"A choice and yet no choice. He was not consulted, all was not told him. I ask nothing for his sake. At Calais I did not know, or I would have asked nothing then. How can he love the English, who killed his brother in Canada? He will hate the nation always, but not the man. Once I think you made him forget—it was at Pau, when we were happy together. But happiness is a taskmaster, always asking payment of the memory. We tell ourselves so often that we were happy ten years ago. It is all of the past. Each day we live to mourn yesterday."

"We may live for to-morrow, too—you cannot forbid me do that, Agnes. Even yet, out of the unknown we may find a friend. Will not you take that thought back to France with you?"

She was silent a little while; I saw the tears glistening in her pretty eyes; but her courage was unchanged.

"It would be madness," she said, "madness to

deceive ourselves. I shall return to France to-morrow ; you will forget in your home. One could be content in such a home as this, I think. England seems to me to be one great garden. You have no horizons, no distances, but you have the flowers, and the trees, and the hedges. It is so difficult for a stranger to believe that England is not a little country. There is nothing in the world like an English cottage. I know that France is very beautiful. I love my own land ; but if I were an Englishwoman, I would say that France has not the beauty I have seen in my journey to-day. I have thought of nothing else all the way from London. You will be happy in England, Alfred."

"As happy as you will be in France, *mignonne*. Why should we talk of the hopeless things? Cannot we begin again from the beginning, honestly, without disguise? cannot we give all our hearts and minds to the endeavour? and if we do, who will say that we may not succeed? I shall believe, in spite of you ; I am believing even now, when all this is as unreal to me as any scene upon the stage. Do you wonder if I ask if you really are at Cottesbrook? Oh, I mean to laugh at difficulties. Is a man to love the less because of fate and circumstances? There is no power that can make him do so, no philosophy or creed which preaches that. I shall count every day as one day nearer my goal. You are powerless to prevent me ; you would not wish to prevent me. Yonder is my mother's house, Agnes. Some day you will be its mistress. I am

as sure of it as of the sunshine which is upon us now. Let us go up there and see if my mother cannot find a better argument. We are but children after all."

She would have refused me, but we had emerged from the spinney now ; and all the gardens of the house, glorious at the zenith of the summer, were unrolled before her wondering eyes. Never have I known such a pride of home as came to me in that hour, when, pointing to the chapel and the towers, and the windows of the Abbey flashing crimson in the golden beams, I took Agnes by the hand and led her across the deserted lawn. For I had espied my mother, seated in the arbour by the orangery, and almost dragging my little girl after me I went up to the arbour and said "Mother," and rising she came out to us, and those dear to me were heart to heart in the love which is not of knowledge or of the years, but inborn and foreordained, the love surpassing understanding.

And so Agnes came to Cottesbrook, and she, who had met me bravely, sank into my mother's arms, weeping.



"And so Agnes came to Cottesbrook."

CHAPTER XVIII

I Think of Dover Again

THERE is a train at 5.45 from Market Harborough to St. Pancras, and by this Agnes would return to town, despite my mother's earnest entreaties and my own protests. Her people there, she said, were expecting her, and would meet her at the station. I knew that one of her uncles was at the French Embassy in town; and I could find no argument to gainsay her. She had kept both her destination and the purpose of her visit from these friends, and to delay would be to defeat her own desires. And so it befell that, as she had come, from an unknown place unexpectedly, a wonder figure upon the dusty road to Cottesbrook, so would she go again from my country. She had carried her message from France, and to France would she return. A thousand arguments could not change that resolution unchangeable.

"At least you will write to me? prudence cannot forbid that," I protested, as we drove to the station in my own phaeton. "There can be no possible reason why you should not write."

She answered me evasively.

"Are letters so precious, then? Does any one write a letter except from selfish motives? We tell all the untruths we can think of, and then sign ourselves, 'Yours truly.' Only very clever people write great letters, Alfred."

"That is so; but ordinary people may read the great letters. At least let me have the opportunity. The paper from you which says, 'I remember, I am well,' will not find me incredulous. Have I not deserved as much?"

She thought upon it a little while, as one troubled, and then she said—

"I am not clever, Alfred. What could I say to you except that which I have already said? You have enemies in England. At least you owe me the compliment of acting prudently."

"I will go with the circumspection of a judge to his sherry. If I cannot believe much in these enemies, I am none the less grateful to a little girl who comes here of her affection to tell me of them. Think it seriously, Agnes. You cannot tell me that the French Government would deliberately plot against my life! They have been frightening you—your friends at Calais. If any one were sent over here, it is just to see what I am doing. The fellow has gone back again by this time, to say that I have settled down to squiredom; the others will all give thanks and forget all about me. We shall forget all about them in our turn and let them go on with their work."

I put it so meaningly, for I had a great desire now to prove her knowledge. Her answer told me nothing. It was possible to believe, after all, that I had misjudged her.

"They will never forget," she said quietly. "Sadi Martel will compel them to remember."

"You believe that he is the man, then?"

"I am sure of it; he almost told me so in Paris last week. A woman can learn anything from a man who professes to love her. Do you blame me if I have used my opportunities?"

"I don't blame you at all; but I should like to hear that there were no opportunities. The fellow has been persecuting you. You admit that?"

My chagrin amused her. She smiled for the first time that day, I think.

"Persecutions are flattering for women—sometimes. Sadi Martel is very amusing. And, of course, he is clever."

"They are all clever. It is the last apology a woman makes for a brute. You can say as much for most scoundrels. Are you bound to see this Martel?"

"Until his work is done."

"His work against my country."

"And for mine."

"Dishonourable work, none the less. That is why I find fault with your father. He is a soldier and gentleman. Why does he stoop to the level of such a rogue as Martel? Why does he not remember the traditions of the French Army, and

not seek other, newer traditions less honourable. That is the *crux* of the whole difficulty—not his hostility, but the method of it. I quarrel with that, Agnes; it is that I will do my best to defeat. God made him a Frenchman. He made me an Englishman; there is no logic which forbids us to be friends unless it is the logic of dishonour. Why nation hates nation may be a thesis for the philosophers; it is not for us. Tell me that Colonel Lepeletier is doing his duty as a French officer, and I will never complain of him. But show me a fine old soldier dragged at the heels of a drunken engineer to a crafty and despicable plot against my own country, and I will never rest until I have exposed and defeated it. That is all my story, all that I would have you say in France of me. Am I wrong to believe that you will tell it sympathetically? ”

I had spoken very frankly to her, deeming the moment opportune; and she heard me with serious eyes and a little tremor of the lips which betrayed her deeper thoughts. Odd, indeed, that a few weeks could so change that impulsive, laughing nature and show me in its place one grown old in wisdom suddenly, a woman and yet a child. Nevertheless, I confess, there was no prettier thing in all the world than Agnes serious, Agnes the wisehead, Agnes, the matron of counsel and prudence. The newer mood told me that the secret had been kept from her.

“ I shall speak sympathetically always, even

when I do not understand," she said quietly. "My father's work at Escalles is no dishonour. It is because another is our friend that you and I must speak like this to-night. Sometimes I think that he has the power to ruin my father and would use it if he could. His secret against your country is his own—it may be yours too. I will not ask. I know that you will do your duty, Alfred, as I know that we shall never meet again."

A word of ill-omen indeed, yet one she reiterated as we drove on to the station, and the moment of separation was at hand. Nor could I answer it as I would have wished. The greater truth weighed upon me and seemed to forbid that closer understanding which fate denied to us for so many fateful days. She knew, I said, and yet she did not know. Her clever little head could argue as I had argued upon the hidden works at Escalles and those who laboured therein. Some great secret she understood of it; but the nature of that secret had been hidden from her. And over all was the sense of destiny, that birthright of ours, which asked of her a great love for France, as it asked of me a great love for England. Who shall wonder if all the logic of our careless lives could not wrestle with a problem so complex? But yesterday she was a little girl in short skirts, counting her tennis balls and complaining bitterly that her bicycle was broken. What irony asked of her this courage of foreboding, this brave surrender to the sacrifice her love demanded? For she was schooled to

sacrifice now. She said "Good-bye" to me as one who knew that this was the end.

Harry was in the billiard-room when I returned to the Abbey, and he followed me to my own den to hear the news. Excited as I was by the surprises of the day, I could yet tell him a coherent story and explain a resolution to which I had come as I drove my horses furiously upon the station road. I would go to Dover. The quiet of my home was not good for me. Delusion or no delusion, the victim of hallucination or of truth, I must find work to do.

"Harry," I said, "you must concoct a story for my mother. I am going to Dover to-morrow."

"Nice work for the Church, my son. The parson lying for the parish. Instruct him in the art, and he will do his best. Is there no story of your regiment that will serve?"

"My colonel refuses to accept my papers. He says I am to get well. A regimental order. I will obey it at Dover, perhaps."

"An idea, 'fore Gad. You go to Dover to study fortifications. Well, I think my conscience permits. After all, it might be a great work, or something to laugh at. Pray God the latter. And, seriously, you don't look well. I am a stranger and I see it. They never see these things in families. You tell a man that his sister is in consumption, and he says, 'Oh, is she?' He would much sooner have a tip for the Derby."

"Agreed; but I shall not suffer any anxieties on



my sister Meg's account. Let them age you, my dear Harry."

He smoked his pipe fiercely.

"I think I can support them. Meg's present ailments are backhanders and an objectionable habit of placing the ball where I cannot reach it. Observe the folly of youth theological. This morning I wrote a sermon on Genesis one to eight; this afternoon I played Swiss skittles on your lawn. The sublime and the ridiculous both equally useful. At Dover you will know one or the other—not both. I shall try to run down, if only for four-and-twenty hours, in a week or two's time. Meanwhile, don't forget the man in the drive. Mademoiselle cautioned you, I think? I hope you will remember it?"

"I shall remember nothing so childish. At Dover I mean to learn finally and for all time if there is the smallest chance in the world of the French striking through, unknown to us, with a tunnel to our coast. If there is, I don't care whether five men or five hundred promenade this drive. The incredulous laugh at my story—if they laugh to the end no one will be better pleased than I. But I am going to prove it, Harry, if it costs me my life and my future. Acquit me of the boast, for you understand my meaning."

"There can be no boast in the matter. How should there be? You believe in a remote possibility. That is enough. If I could help, I would cast off every tie in the world to go with you. But I am only an old parson, and you, my dear fellow,

you, with your serious views of life and your sometimes wild notions of duty, you are the very man I would send to the work. Go, and God bless you! I hope and pray that it is a child's errand. If it should be otherwise, the day may yet come when England will remember the name of Alfred Hilliard."

And so it befell, for the hour was already late, that with no more talk upon it all I said "Good-bye" to him. And there was this thought in my mind, that to-morrow I should be in Dover; to-morrow, perchance, should answer the strangest question man ever asked himself. Nor did I foresee, as I went up to my bedroom, even the least of those terrible days I must live through before I might hear the voice of Harry Fordham again. Gladly in the hope of truth I set out—to the unknown and the peril of it.

CHAPTER XIX

A Phantom Cravat

IT is the fashion to speak of London in August as a deplorable place, full of odours and heats and the dust which patrician feet have left behind them in their scamper for the coast. I lay no such charge against the first of our cities. Hot she may be, but there are always cool corners in her clubs; dust there is, but you can forget it in her parks. Those you meet have the air of good fellows left behind. They can see the plays now which boasted bookings forbade to them in June. It is good to stroll in the deserted streets and snap up the "bargains" with which astute dealers tempt John Ploughman. The very waiters in the restaurants have leisured moments. A cabman takes you five miles out of your way, and you chuckle when you correct his distances and pay him a legal fare.

You may even recall your youthful days and go to the Zoological Gardens or the Tower—a fact which you forget to mention when you return to the shires again. There are worse things to do.

The lions of the season are not more interesting

than the animal celebrities of Regent's Park. Those who lived in the Tower wrought for England and lost their heads. You reflect on the inconsistencies of the new order which does not permit one party to cut off the heads of the other party—but inflicts the torture of the wild debater. A weak-kneed generation, but one which these later days is making strong again.

A feverish activity followed me from Cottesbrook to London. I had resolved to pass the night at my club, to "do the Palace," and go on by the early boat express to Dover; but the silence of the city, the solitude there, the doubt and perplexity which had sent me from my home, were not to be borne, and no sooner had I lunched than I found myself with a newer and better resolution. I would go on at once and reach my goal. A strange hunger for the sea and the white cliffs was not to be resisted. From Dover, I said, a man might look out to the sand-dunes of Calais, to Gris-Nez and to Escalles—to the harbour which the French were building and to those ramparts I alone of Englishmen had trod. There, at least, the hallucination which had come so strangely into my life might find its antidote in that Quixotic mission to which I had been called by the irresistible voice of Conscience. The truth of it, the truth of my dreams, the secret, to laugh at it, to proclaim it before the world if the need were, such I sought. And whoso judgeth me, let him read on. Had I been but a dreamer, these pages were never written.

I say that I could not rest in London, could not contemplate with equanimity so much as a single night in the city whence all but the people had fled. There was, they told me at the club, a train called the Granville express, leaving Charing Cross shortly after three o'clock; and in this, as the old-fashioned announcement went, I might hope to come to Deal safe in body and baggage at the express speed of forty miles an hour. Such a prospect of enterprise and management was not to be resisted. By Deal, I could see those low shores of Pegwell Bay the golfers trod, by Deal and thence to Dover first mock my fears and point the fingers at them. So behold me booking my place, and, equipped simply with dressing case and golf clubs, taking my seat in a first-class carriage and entrusting myself to that Providence which, possibly, watches over travellers even on the South-Eastern Railway.

There was no one in the carriage at Charing Cross, nor did other passengers trouble me at Cannon Street. I began to think that I should be left alone with my papers, when, at the very moment the train began to move from London Bridge Station, the door of the compartment was unlocked, and a man fell almost headlong into the seat before me. I had been reading a magazine, and for an instant I did not see the man's face. But when he looked up I recognised him at once. He was the fellow my grooms had chased from the Abbey grounds not forty-eight hours before.

There are some grave situations in life we face

with unwonted calm ; others which unnerve us from the beginning, we know not why. Few, I think, will lay a charge of cowardice against me if I confess that my experiences of that day must be put in the latter category. Judge it as you will, I would not seek to deny that the sudden apparition of the man frightened me as I have rarely been frightened in all my life. Rightly or wrongly, I believed that he had come there to kill me. Agnes's warnings, the desperate attempts the French had made to take me at Calais, the sure belief in my own conclusions, together justified the wildest notions. I thought that I was face to face with an assassin. I knew that for an hour or more the Granville express did not stop at any station. What wonder if the moment held me impotent, if I could neither think nor act until long minutes had passed, and the train had left the spires and chimneys of London behind us on our horizon ?

The man had seated himself opposite to me, but presently he moved to the further corner, and we were then so placed that each could look the other full in the face if he would. He had no luggage, not so much as a rug or a paper ; nor did he carry stick or umbrella. His dress was a shabby frock-coat suit ; his silk hat, by no means new, had been all roughed by rain and travel. I set him down as a man of middle age, of forty years, perhaps, but in type and characteristics he was truly French, his pointed red beard, his shifting grey eyes, his well-made boots, his enormous black cravat

betraying his nationality beyond any possibility of question. And now the greatest wonder was that I had feared him at all. We had left London behind us, and the air of Kent blew fresh and sweet through the open window. The spell which had held me had passed; I sat up in my seat and laughed at myself. He was but a puny customer after all—an ill-shaped creature with whom a lad might have wrestled confidently. Yet what of that? I asked myself a moment later. If the man meant mischief he would be armed. A sudden shot in the darkness of the tunnel, a knife—there were many ways. Reflection moderated my content. I foresaw such an hour as I shall never pass again.

We speak of Providence carelessly, preferring the terms "luck," "chance," "good fortune"; but I shall always say that Providence, and Providence alone, sent me to the particular seat I occupied upon that amazing journey. For it befell that I was in that corner of the carriage where the electric alarm stood; and, looking up to it, I told myself that the Frenchman must be quick indeed to forestall me if I would pull it. It came to me, moreover, that whatever suspicion of the man I entertained, he, last of all, must be aware of it. Cost me what it might, I would play an indifferent part, fencing with him as he with me, reading, resting, smoking, but never once turning my eyes from his face. So far did I carry it at last that I offered him a newspaper and told him there was news from Paris in it; but he nodded his head curtly, nor did he take

the paper. It was to be a silent game, after all, then!

We entered the long tunnel by Chislehurst, and climbed the bank of it laboriously. There was no light in the carriage, and as we left the sunshine behind us, and the thunderous echoes from the walls dinned in my ears, I changed my seat stealthily and sat in the opposite corner. The long minutes of waiting, the anticipation of some act, I knew not what, fear of the darkness and of the man, played upon nerves, already overwrought to the point of collapse. Nervously I struck match after match in the make-believe that my pipe would not light; but the feeble rays of flickering light showed me an immobile figure in the corner, the odd, shifting eyes, the huge cravat, the crouching figure—these and nothing more. Until we emerged into the daylight I do not believe that I took a full breath. After all nothing had happened, except that one had played a craven part.

There were three tunnels yet to be passed before we came to Sevenoaks; but the Frenchman, with what design I did not then discover, lit a candle-lamp at the first of them and affixed it to the glass. Moreover, he addressed me—I think for the first and last time from the beginning to the end of it.

“You do not like the darkness, monsieur, *moi non plus*. We will have the candle, and then we shall see.”

It was too grotesque, my Frenchman fearing the darkness! I answered him in a torrent of words,

the tribute to excitement and to relief. What a phantom had I conjured up—the phantom—of this mere informer sent from France to tell his friends what I was doing—that I should make of him an assassin or a robber! Of course he had no ulterior designs. He was a spy and nothing more; who followed me from Cottesbrook and would follow me to Dover. It remained to profit of the knowledge, to remember Agnes's words that I had enemies in England. Out on the Downs, I could laugh at her warnings! Here in the confined arena of a railway carriage, they were remembered more soberly. The man might be a consummate actor, after all. It would be folly beyond words to believe him for the asking.

This latest apprehension went with me for the remainder of the journey. I was no longer coward or craven, nor did I fear the man; but the very fact of his presence, added to that which I had heard yesterday, kept my eyes upon him and my brain awake. Magazine after magazine went through my hands unread. I had a pipe in my mouth, but the tobacco was unlighted. There was always that afterthought that he might declare himself suddenly, and that we two—a Frenchman in a big cravat, and a traveller in a serge suit—might be at any moment engaged in the *lutte pour la vie* upon the floor of a railway carriage. So did the idea grow upon me with the miles that at last the very cravat he wore began to take strange shapes, to be magnified ridiculously, so that it seemed to cover all his body

and to leave but his odd, shifty eyes exposed. The hallucination was grotesque and real—the outcome of nervous strain, if you will. I battled with it resolutely, and began to have a great dread of sleep, even of a momentary doze. Instinct told me that the man waited for this; that if I slept I might never wake again. And instinct was true enough, as I was to learn presently.

We were late at Ashford, and we stopped there ten minutes. I have often wondered why I did not change carriages at that place and end the suspense finally. Perhaps it was that I deemed such a surrender to mere imagination an affront upon myself, upon my manhood and my courage. True, the man went to the refreshment-room, and I could readily have found an excuse for quitting the compartment, but I stuck to my seat doggedly; and, as though to convince me of my mistaken judgment, the fellow appeared to sleep between Ashford and Canterbury, and was still asleep at Minster Junction. Now, I think for the first time, I put aside all doubts and read in comfort. Upon my left hand were the lonely dunes of Sandwich; beyond them the pier of Deal and the fresh seas of the Channel—those waters of which an Englishman never thinks but to remember their masters in a dead day—Drake, Frobisher, and Hawkins, and their unnumbered sons—who singed the Spanish king's beard, as many a Jack would singe a kingly beard to-day if England's need should ask it of him. In truth, I would remember the man no more, and, assured that he was

sleeping, I lit my pipe and read my paper and waited for the end.

Deal; and beyond Deal (for I had no mind to linger there) the tunnel to Dover town. The Frenchman roused himself when we entered the tunnel and shut his candle-lamp with a snap. We were in utter darkness again, and I, who had stood up to lift my bag from the rack, sat down as suddenly. Not for one instant did I imagine that here was the moment for which I had waited so long. The loud report of a pistol, a stinging sensation in my cheek, a flame of fire, the vision of a devilish face, of staring eyes, of the phantom cravat, all these together as in a flash, left me for an instant without word or understanding. Slowly, misshapen, and reluctantly the truth of it all came back. The man was an assassin, after all, then! The very knowledge sent the blood leaping through my veins and called me to myself. Crying out in the excitement of it, clenching my hands, I sprang at the corner where he had sat and struck at him, angrily, madly, with all the blood-lust which passion can awake. But my fists beat the cushions, were bruised against the door; the devil within me could not restrain the blows. He had cheated me, I said, had leaped from the carriage, was dead upon the line, perhaps. A second report, a crash of glass, a sudden rush of air brought me to my senses. The man was behind me in my own seat; he had stepped across the cushions to reach me more surely. I threw myself upon him again, felt his hot breath,

touched the steel of his pistol ; but, and here was the mystery, he slipped inexplicably from my touch, was not to be held. In vain I tried to grip him by the throat, in vain to prison him with my knees. He was lithe as an acrobat, clever as a clown ; and crying out in his turn, defiantly, triumphantly, he eluded my touch and was gone from my ken. In the same moment we came out to the light of Dover station, and I saw that I was alone in the carriage, and that I held the man's coat in my bleeding hands.

He had opened the door of the compartment behind him, as we struggled together, and gone, God knew by what trick of his. There was blood upon my cheek, but I said that I stood unharmed for the work's sake, and for that which my duty called upon me to do.

CHAPTER XX

Pursued who had been Pursuer

THERE was a crowd at Dover Station, I remember, and many people to put questions to me, and a buzz of voices, and an extremely unprofitable wagging of tongues. It is always difficult to tell of such moments with precision or to give any useful account of them. I had a plain story to narrate to the inspector of police and to those who helped him to write it down; nevertheless I told it incoherently, with all those unnecessary words which betray the speaker's nervousness. A man had fired a pistol at me in the tunnel beyond the station; he had ridden with me from London Bridge; he was a Frenchman with an absurd cravat and a deplorable hat. Possibly he was a madman (the police applauded lunacy), possibly he was merely a thief (the police did not think so); but, in either case, he had scarred my cheek with a bullet, and I had flayed my knuckles in an attempt to knock him down. If he were to be caught, I imagined that no time was to be lost; in which the police agreed with me after many new questions, and much scraping

of quills, and an assurance that the man must certainly be taken to-morrow, if not to-night—a promise of less meaning to me than the unwritten story I could have told them so tragically. Ah! that was momentous, truly. And that was the story I carried to my room in the Lord Warden Hotel.

It had been a glorious day of summer, and the night fell soft and balmy as some night of an Eastern spring-time, full of the suggestion of warmth and life and of lands remote from the winter world and the knowledge of the snow. Dover herself, always an active town, was busy now with the coming and going of those who “made the tours” and were marshalled, as so many sheep, for thirteen or fifteen days in the butchers’ shops of Italy or Switzerland. The Lord Warden Hotel bubbled over with its merry human flocks, full of the wonders of Lucerne or hungry for those of Grindelwald. Out in the town the mere suburban son of the lodging-house listened to blaring bands, or was drawn with dancing feet to the mysteries of halls by the “silver” sea. All about me as I sat at table were the types I knew so well—the anxious parson with the wide-awake hat and the wideawake daughters; the solitary spinster given to psalms and “hims”; the old traveller disdaining haste and proud of his peaks; mamma with an eye upon the major and another for her daughter (who flew not above captains); the distressed old lady who is sure that she will lose her brown-paper parcel presently; the aristocratic family travelling aristocratically and

without mirth; the reading party from Oxford whose checks are not louder than its voices—a heterogeneous company bred of summer and the sea, a troop you may seek in vain when the gates of Switzerland are shut and the birds are calling “northward” in the last mellow days of August. For my part, I joined it without interest or the desire of friends. The great dining-room, with its murmur of voices and clash of plates, acted strangely upon nerves over-wrought and curiously high-pitched. How, I asked myself, if I told any one of these people the nature of my errand, the purpose of my visit? Would they call me madman or dreamer? Would they be justified to-morrow, or would to-morrow justify me? The day alone could answer. Yet the hour of the question was not passed before I met a friend in the Lord Warden Hotel and told him why I came to Dover. And he called me neither one name nor the other; but listened sympathetically with an interest I had not looked for.

I found him in the corridor of the hotel—Charles Mallinson, the engineer, now a great figure in a great railway enterprise; always a master of his art and a master of men. Tall, lithe, showing an honest English face upon which the suns of India had written prematurely of years, a man of the early forties, grave and thoughtful and full of cleverness, I knew not one (if it were not Harry) I would have named before him as a confessor for that night. And he met me with a like enthusiasm. The

anxious parson, the ancient traveller, the solitary spinster did not interest him. He admitted that he was going to bed to avoid them.

"An hotel has always one redeeming feature," was his defence when we had shaken hands heartily—"you can go to bed without making excuses. It's not so in a man's house, which they call, ironically, his castle. Let's strike a climate where we can't hear that piano. I'm sure they will play pianos in Hades—loud pedal down and the 'Kaiser's March.' Are you game for a stroll?"

I was as willing as he to quit the hotel, and without further ado we put on our dustcoats and strolled towards the Castle hill. Bands were still playing on the front; the basin, awake to the tide, opened its gate to ships and to the wrangling voices of the seamen. From the Channel there came a gentle, easterly breeze, sending long, rippling waves upon the rolling shingle and little jets of spray from the new harbour works. But that which first enchained my eyes was the distant light of Cape Gris-Nez, casting its panoply of flame to the starry heaven; Gris-Nez, from whose shadow I had snatched the secret; Gris-Nez, the beacon of the ramparts I had trod. So potent was the memory which the scene awakened, that my friend spoke twice before I heard him. In imagination, I had already spanned the seas, and was running upon the beach by Escalles again. Mallinson's voice recalled me as from a stupor of sleep.

"They tell me there has been a shindy in the

Granville express to-day—man shot at, or something of the sort. Did you hear anything of it?"

I told him, undramatically, that I was the man. He cried "Impossible!" and walked on a little way silently. I think he waited for me.

"Yes," I went on, "the man certainly fired a shot at me—hence the blush on my cheek. The police say he is a lunatic; but I know that he is not. He shot at me because I got into the new French fort, over yonder, by Cape Gris-Nez. He or some one else will fire another round if I give him a chance. Not pleasant, you admit?"

"Are you serious, my dear Hilliard?"

"As a judge—who has made a joke. I'll tell you all about it if you like. A man who talks the past does not think the present; and the present is not particularly pleasant to-night. Let's stroll on where there are not so many people."

We turned from the front up the hill toward the Castle; and while we went I began to speak to him, as one brother to another (for to this his kindly character compelled me); and though at first I said nothing of the graver story, he drew it from me at last, line by line, until he had the whole of it, and there was no longer anything to tell.

"Gad!" he exclaimed at last, "what an idea to get into your head! You really mean and believe all this?"

"On my honour, I mean and believe every word of it. You know me well enough to admit that I am neither a dreamer nor a fool. I saw the tunnel

at Escalles, went a mile down it, and was sure that I was only at the beginning of it. The rest is imagination. It may lie there at our very feet; it may be half-way across the Channel and no further. I have come to Dover to try and find out. You could help me, if you would."

We were up on the heights then; and the moonlit sea rolled below us as some unstable carpet of silver cloth tossed restlessly by untiring hands. Gris-Nez shone out majestically above the looming low cloud which made our horizon; and to it the Foreland sent an answer, the answer of the "coast-wise" lights of England. There was the same thought in both our minds, I am sure, as we looked down from that high place upon our country's shimmering ramparts—defiance, delight, and, warring upon these, the great uncertainty. What was below that sheen of the waters? Was there a pit dug by French hands, a tube which presently would fire a mighty human shell against England's liberty—nay, against her very existence as a nation? The mere contemplation of the problem could thrill the nerves as a story surpassing all stories that war had ever told. I wondered no longer that I had left Cottesbrook. Until that question was answered I knew that life had no other interest for me.

Mallinson heard my appeal, but was silent upon it for many minutes. Just as it had fascinated Harry, the parson, so did it fascinate this man of brain and steel. He made the third victim, I said.

"Help you, my dear fellow?" he exclaimed at last. "Why, a man might well give up everything else in life, if what you tell him is not mere imagination!"

"You think it is that?"

"I pronounce no opinion. Undoubtedly, such a thing could be built if you find the men and the money. We proposed to build a tunnel to France—why should not the French try to build one to us? Assume that they consider certain things—the possibility of mad politicians in this country sanctioning such a scheme some day; or a temporary triumph which gives them a footing near Dover and enables them to complete the tunnel on this side. Their great bankers find some of the money, the Government the rest. Clever engineers might dodge the difficulties of levels which some of us have foreseen on this side. They get their direction by the theodolite and push their tube across, say, to within a mile of Dover. When a mad Parliament here says 'Yes,' they are ready to complete before our people begin. It's all as plain as A B C—to me at least. And it's the most fascinating thing I ever heard."

"That I grant. I have hardly slept since I knew of it. And now I am here, looking for a Frenchman's head to come up through the shingle. Nonsense, of course, but the kind of nonsense that gets hold of one."

He laughed in agreement.

"You need not fear that. If they came out at

all, it would not be on the beach. I should place the head of their tunnel three miles, at least, from the shore——”

The words came to me as some tremendous revelation of the night. I stood still and gripped his arm; he must be held to that admission.

“Three miles from the shore! Do you mean that, Mallinson? Three miles from the shore. They may be working here, after all, then. Great God! Suppose they have taken a house and are using the grounds! Suppose a hundred things. It’s enough to set a man’s brain on fire.”

He released his arm from my grip and began to descend the hill quickly.

“Let’s think about it to-morrow,” he retorted. “I don’t share your alarm, though I share your interest. The tunnel may be there, under the sea, but by God’s providence it will remain there to the end. I have confidence in the national destiny, and I am going to smoke a cigar. But I shan’t sleep to-night. You have my night’s rest on your conscience, if that’s any consolation.”

I did not answer him, and we went down to the hotel together. Imagination, awakened again, showed me a lonely country house and peopled it with an army of Frenchmen set upon the strangest enterprise that the hatred of one nation for another had begotten in the history of the world.

CHAPTER XXI

The Veil of the Darkness

MALLINSON had left Dover when I came down to breakfast on the following morning; but I found a scrawl from him saying that a "breakdown" called him to Lincoln, and that he hoped to see me in London when I went north again. "If it is any satisfaction to you to know it," he added, "your idea kept me awake all night, as I promised you it would, and I don't doubt that it will be a long time before I get the devils of your imagination out of my head. At the best, it is an idea which makes a man ask himself questions. I will ask myself many in the next week or two, and put the answers down for your edification. Meanwhile, go and look for your house, my dear fellow—go and look for it, even if you laugh at yourself afterwards for your pains. I would do the same in your place, and I am no sentimentalist. 'Chance has put up this sign-post for you, and you have no right to pass it by.'"

I read his letter with interest, for it was something to win the approval of such a man; and I

knew that if he began upon the problem, the solution of it was not distant. Reserved, reticent, that odd life of his, carrying him hither and thither as some accumulator of human energy, to be called for wherever difficulty or danger was, had achieved much for humanity, though humanity had yet to thank him. That he, of all men, should be a victim of the hallucination was the greater miracle. But his friendship was well prized, and I found myself the stronger for it when I rode out of Dover very early in the day, and told myself that where impulse led me, there would I follow.

It was a gloomy morning, generous of cloud and echoing the lingering voice of storm. There had been thunder at dawn, and heavy, sheeted rain, which swept the decks of the ships as with a natural hose, and left a film of glistening spray upon the dewy grass, and bubbling burns where dry ravines had been. Close and breathless as the atmosphere became, forbidding the outlook, ten o'clock, nevertheless, found me upon my horse; and by eleven I had come out upon a devious route, skirting Elm Wood and West Houghton to the Warrens above Folkestone, and so by the main road toward the town itself and to the Pavilion Hotel there. The object of my journey, I imagined, was a remote or lonely house wherein the French engineers might do their work. Oh, I had it all so plainly now that Mallinson had spoken. Of course, I said, Robert Jeffery would not seek an opening for his tunnel in the precincts of Dover or upon

the adjoining shore. Just as at Escalle the workings were laid three miles from the beach, so at Dover must I look three miles inland for their counterpart. None but a child in mechanical knowledge would have neglected so simple a truth or turned to the shore for his justification. I would laugh at myself for my very ignorance as I cantered over the splendid turf and said that I did not care if one month or six found me still at the task; for I was up and working, and a good horse went with me, and the sea breeze blew upon my face.

It was a vain pursuit—you have imagined that—and many a fruitless day followed upon it before the terror of the end and all the strange events of which I now must speak. They learned to know me, I think, those simple folk of the downlands; and, knowing me, I got much from their gossip and their gratitude. Great houses I saw in those days of searching, farms, cottages—but no house before which I might draw rein to ask, “Why does such a man live in such a place? what work is doing there?” Eastward, westward, upon the Canterbury road, the Deal road, to Windgate Hill, to Alkham, often enjoying a splendid gallop across the stubble, picnicking in solitary places, gossiping, questioning—so the weeks were passed until that great day came when Harry was to leave Cottesbrook, and Mallinson would be in Dover again as he had promised. And that day was the day of days, though I knew it not at dawn.

I had risen betimes, I remember, for I was full of the excitement of seeing my friends again; recollecting how much and how little I had to tell them, and wondering if, after all, those weeks of waiting would not find their end in laughter. Then, for the last time, perchance, I rode my good horse over the Whinless Downs toward the Abbey road; then, for the last time, sought a house which should harbour the men of Calais. For I had ceased to believe in myself or my mission, and I said that to-morrow I would ride no more.

The way was to the Abbey, be it written, to St. Radegund's and Coombe Farm, and, beyond that, across the easy country to Swingfield and Wootton. I lunched in the quiet village; and being mindful that Harry's train reached Dover at half-past five I did not linger, but returned at an easy pace, following the high road until it brought me out at Little London, and so coming to Alkham and thence to the Abbey; whereby I got a cup of tea and gave my horse a breather. Hitherto, I had always followed the high road, that which they call St. Radegund's, in such an excursion as this; but to-day, finding that I had still an hour to spare, I chose the other branch, which goes round by River Bottom Wood and so to the main London road by Ewell. It was a pleasant way, well-wooded and shady; and I had not been ten minutes upon it before I observed a low, red-brick house peeping up picturesquely from a belt of trees, and so girt about with plantations that it made an oasis, pleasant to

see, in the vista of rolling downs. To claim that the house interested me above the common would be altogether to misrepresent the circumstance. If the truth be told, I was so set upon Harry's coming, so full of the thought of meeting Mallinson again, that I might as well have passed the house at a canter as a trot, had it not been for a chance which changed me in an instant from an indifferent man, jogging homeward indifferently upon a tired horse, to one awake, alert, with every faculty quickened; a man who knew in that moment that he had stumbled upon the truth and might pay for the knowledge with his life. As God is my witness, I came face to face with Robert Jeffery at the gates of the house, and, drawing rein, I sat there as one deprived of all power to speak or think or act.

He was dressed in a knickerbocker suit of grey cloth, which contrasted ill with his bronzed face; there was a hammerless gun under his arm; I saw him turn to call a pretty spaniel which ran from him towards the woods of the house. That he had all the mind to shoot me where I sat, I have never doubted. His expression was the most malignant I have seen, the expression of a man who meant mischief but would not dare it.

That the effort to master himself cost him much was plain to be seen; yet that he so mastered himself I am sure, and when we had faced each other for an instant he took a step toward the house and whistled a loud, shrill whistle, calling,

at the same time, to his dog again, and then running back to the road to speak to me. I heard him with an indifference ill-feigned enough. If a man had offered me a thousand pounds, I do not believe that I could have ridden from the place.

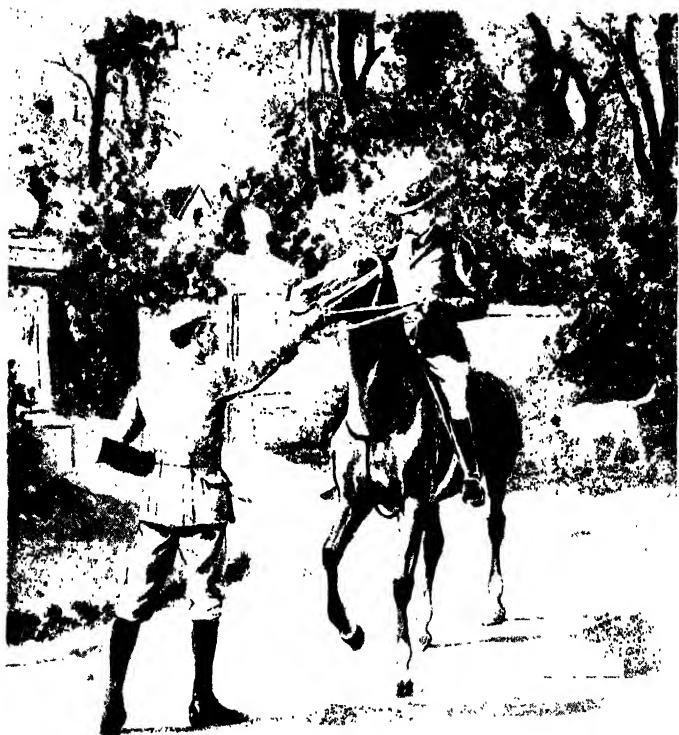
"Soho! my boy, you have found me out at last? Been grubbing about this country a long time, haven't you? Well, I thought so. D—n me, but I'm pleased to see you. You're stopping to take tea with me, of course—tea they brew down Scotland way, and right good stuff, too. Say, you're coming in for three fingers."

He took a step towards me, and put his hand upon my bridle-rein. I gripped my crop tightly, and touching the cob with my left spur, edged her away from him, despite his attempt to hold me.

"Thanks," I said; "but I took tea with you once before. There's no need of reminiscences, eh? Just stand out of my way, or I'll have to whistle my dog. He wears a white choker, and can bark loudly sometimes."

He drew back sharply at the words and looked down upon the road, upon which no human thing was to be seen. The *suggestio falsi* did not deceive him.

"Oh," he said, "bringing the chaplain along, too, eh? Let's see—what was his name—Ford—Ford—ah, Fordham, same as the jockey who won my first Derby. Well, I'll be glad to have the pair of you—two at a bag, and nice birds, I know. First of September, eh, Captain? Close time over—you know."



"He took a step towards me, and put his hand upon my
bridle-rein."

Pro Patria

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question, "Why had he let me go? Why had he shown himself at the gates of the house at all? Why was he, of all men, in England that day?" Turning in my saddle when the umbrageous leaves gave an opening to the vista, I could distinguish his lithe, sinuous figure out there in the roadway; and I made sure that he was waving a hand to me to call me back. The very sense of freedom was unreal and strange. So subtle was the fascination the man exercised upon me, that I began to wonder if he could compel me, after all, to go back to him. His whistle, echoing shrilly in the trees, seemed to strike a discord in my very marrow. I was afraid, and not afraid; excited in thought, yet cool in act; desirous of hearing him and escaping him in the same breath. While, at one moment, it seemed to me that the wood by the roadside was peopled by veiled figures, at the next I said that I had only to ride on and in a quarter of an hour I might be in Dover. And yet Dover appeared so far away, the woods so lonely, the peril so undefined and malevolent, that at last I could suffer the spell no more, and striking the cob sharply I sought to put her at a canter. But she rolled headlong from beneath me, and coming to the ground heavily, I lost consciousness; and the sky and the trees and the men who ran out from the wood vanished from my eyes in a loom of darkness.

CHAPTER XXII

A Remote Farmhouse

I HAD gone down in darkness, as the old phrase goes, and from darkness I came back to life and consciousness, painfully, laboriously, through a maze of dreams and the oddest figures of the imagination which a mind abroad could furnish for me. Aware of the light at last, I had no knowledge of any event that had brought me to a scene so strange or thus had changed the sunshine to the gloom of the place wherein I lay. For that which my awaking eyes beheld was a low, vaulted room, with boarded loopholes for its windows, and great buttresses of the bare stone for its walls, and such an oddity of old-time furniture, that I might have been in the cell of a forgotten monastery rather than in the garret of a Kentish farmhouse. Not for a long while could my groping mind put the links of that chain together. That I had ridden out of Dover, that Harry was coming from Cottesbrook, that this was to be the last day of the search—these facts we reiterated in a whirl of confused thought which left no objective impressions but those of aching head and bruised

limbs, and the knowledge of fatigue such as I had never known. The room and the meaning of the room I might not realize, until, as it seemed, long hours had been lived through. I could remember only that I had left Dover after breakfast, and that Harry's train was due at half-past five o'clock. But I knew that the sun was shining in the world outside, and the desire to be up and upon my cob pursued me as a fever.

A man's voice recalled me to the truth, and I started up from the bed to survey the room more closely, if possible to discover who occupied it with me. Dim as the light was, making evening of the day, I could yet discern the heavy, time-stained walls, the massive buttresses of stone which gave to the place its air of a monastic cell, and seemed to chill its atmosphere as with the breath of a dead and moulding past. Shadows, too, were there in the glow of the filtered light—the shadows of quaint, high-backed chairs; of bureau and bench and box which the Middle Ages had used, but this age had despised. A turret-room it had been, I saw—a lumber-place built when mason was monk and monk was mason. And they had carried me there—from the road where I fell?

Thus, by fact and question, I linked my chain of memory; and now, as in a flash, I recollected it all—the meeting with Jeffery, the stumbling cob, the figures in the wood, the sudden darkness. This was the house, then; the clumsy cob had sent me here; one of the men watched me as I lay upon the bed. I

could follow his eyes, peering from the shadows as the eyes of a cat which sees where others are blind. But he did not utter as much as a single word after the first, nor had I any fear of him ; and for a long while we two rested thus—I upon the bed waiting for him, and he staring at me out of the darkness. To this day I do not know if he were Jeffery or another ; for when I began to struggle to my feet he opened the door very dexterously and was gone from the room in an instant. Then I breathed again and stood up. I was glad to be alone.

A remote farmhouse in Kent; Frenchmen peopling its grounds; an engineer, who had served the French Government, the apparent master of the house; myself a prisoner in a garret of it, for that which I had seen across the sea at Escalles—is it profitable to say with what varying emotions I realized my own justification? Three months had passed since a day at Calais, which had taken me to the strangest sight the sea ever showed to a soldier; for three months I had been the scorn of those who won my confidence, the suspected of friends, the dreamer who seeks to say, "The dream is false"; and now this new day could answer for ever the questions I had asked myself. True, before God and man, the dream was true, then! Here, three miles from the shores of my own country, in a place where no spy—no, not the shrewdest that ever breathed—might have looked for it, here were those who would go down—or, it might be, already had gone down—to meet that road of steel which, minute by

minute and hour by hour, France thrust out beneath the Channel-bed until it should touch the gardens of England and make her mistress of them. No dream, no hallucination, I said, but a truth so terrible that every other impulse of being—my hope of career, my hope of love, my hope of home—was lost in it. For I was a prisoner in that house of mystery when I would have given all my fortune to have cried out the warning to my countrymen.

The dream was true, and I had not dreamed in vain. Beyond it there remained a burden of reproach which might well have crushed a stronger man than I. To know and to be impotent; to say that any chance, the most trifling, would have sent me back to Dover, free and ready that night; to remember what might have been if others had but listened to me—I wondered that I weighed these things and did not lose my reason. Nevertheless, even at the crisis of it, some better instinct guided me, some surer hand of my schooling held me back from the folly which neither courage nor desire could have made good. I said that I would play a man's part—and, so saying, I turned from the door which my hands would have struck and sat upon my bed again.

The day was waning then, and from the fields without there came the music of the dusk—pigeons circling to roost, the lowing of kine, the crack of the harvester's whip, the rumble of heavy wheels upon a hardened road. Within the house the silence was broken by the gong of a clock which struck

seven ; and, anon, by the footsteps of many men, who, as the sounds would tell, flocked together to the staircase below and came up in numbers to some of the rooms about my own. I heard many voices, loud, free, unrestrained ; and so clear were they that I knew they spoke the French tongue, and imagined the speakers to be what they were—workers at Jeffery's command, those chosen servants of his who had passed me in the tunnel at Escalles. Yet what their number was, or what work they did here by Chilton in Kent, I could but surmise as my knowledge helped me. They were here, I said, to thrust down an answering shaft to the one which Escalles pushed out towards England. While the greater burden must fall to the French shore, while the tunnel must be almost completed from that side, here in Kent the head of it would be built, the shaft dug out. It might even be that in a week or a month the straight high-road to our coast would be opened, never to be shut again ; that the day was near when England would be an island no more, but linked by this mighty passage to the Continent which so long had feared her enmity. For in this shape did the fear of it come to me, that as our own Government had been blind at the beginning, so would it be blinded to the end. And I, who could have spoken, was for ever silenced ! A miracle alone could snatch me from the vengeance of the man whose path I had crossed. To him the lot had fallen, and with him now my destiny, or it might be the destiny of millions, lay.

I could reckon thus with it—ah, as man never reckoned yet, while the light drew back from that cell-like room, and the obscurity about me began to turn to the deeper shadow of the night. I was in sore straits enough, God knows, for my head throbbed with the fall, and my limbs were stiff and cold, and faintness and hunger came to share the lot with me; and, above all, there was sure knowledge that these men would show me no mercy nor risk their ends again that I might benefit thereby. Escape, indeed, or perhaps the desire of escape, was early in my thoughts; but that was not the hour of it, whatever might come after. I would not deceive myself with any foolish bravado nor belief in luck which once had served, but might well forget me now. That the house would be watched as a prison I never doubted. My life could be nothing to these men who had staked all on the boldest emprise in the story of their nation. They would kill me when they pleased—and who should name the hour of it, to-night, to-morrow, when the clock next struck? Cowardice, I said, even to debate the thing.

The great gong of the clock in the room below me struck eight, and the door of the room opened with the last beat of the hammer. I had expected to see a strange face, but the light of a small lamp showed me the figure of Jeffery; and I was not surprised that he should come there. Never at any time had I feared this man; I did not fear him now. Curiosity to hear him—it may be, curiosity to see what he would do—sent me to my feet



"Well, Captain," he cried . . . "how do you like your quarters?"

quickly when he entered. We were face to face, at any rate.

He carried a lamp in his right hand, a cigar in his left, and still wore the grey shooting suit which I had remarked at the gate. An old oak bench stood opposite my bed; and here, when he had set the lamp down on a dusty bureau, he seated himself and began to smoke quietly. The unlatched door upon his left hand, blown open by the draught, showed me an empty staircase lit by a candle in an iron stick. It was evident that he feared neither an attempt to escape nor any danger of a quarrel on my part. There were others below, ready at his call.

"Well, Captain," he cried a little boisterously, "and how do you like your quarters?"

I sat upon the bed and answered him in the same spirit.

"In the matter of light and dirt they are just what I should have expected."

"Ah, satirical, I see. A nice job, my boy, isn't it—you in the box, and we not knowing what the devil to do with you? Well, you aren't a considerate man, I must say. Fancy putting people to this trouble!"

"Bring me my cob," said I, "and you shall be put to no trouble at all."

He chewed the end of his cigar for a little while and surveyed me with a glance half-cynical, half-satisfied. His odd, ill-balanced brain troubled itself, I thought, with a jumble of ideas and intentions.

"Ah," he said, "I'll take your Gospel oath on that, Captain Alfred. Make your mind easy, my boy. We aren't going to part with you easy—no, I reckon not. *Pas si bête*, as my brothers downstairs would say. You're one of 'em now. You're an honoured guest at River Bottom Farm; and we've boarded up the windows of your bedroom so that you shan't catch cold. If you want anything, ring the bell. I'll send a new rope up some day, for I see there isn't one. Say, boy, what a game for the parson chap who's waiting for you at Dover! He'll have to turn up Job to-night and spell out a chapter. It's as good as a play to think of it."

He laughed at his own idea; but I could think of nothing to say to him. Presently he continued, less pleasantly,—

"What did you come here at all for—after my machine, eh? Don't tell me different, because I should call you a liar. You came to steal my brains—there's been many on the job, but you're about the best of 'em. And now you're under lock and key. Well, Providence helps poor men sometimes. When you go out of this house you can take the "corkscrew" with you. The cork will be out of the bottle then, and the wine in the glass—good red wine, by the Lord. Does it strike you that way, sonny?"

I tried to answer him quite coolly, as a man debating an opinion. The notion that I had come, not to serve my country's interests, but my own,

amazed me almost to the point of silence. Only such a brain as his—the brain of the engineer whose child was a thing of steel and brass, to be loved as no human child might be—could have looked thus over the supreme fact of the situation to so pitiful a complaint. I believe to this hour that the question of a tunnel was less to him than the invention which bored his tunnel. He thought that I had contrived all to rob him of his child. Impossible to argue with such a mind.

“Come now,” I cried impatiently, “you know that I don’t care twopence about you or your machine. I got out of Calais to tell my countrymen a plain story. Shall we go into particulars?”

“If it amuses you, talk all night. I shan’t believe a word of it, so that’s understood. What the devil was it to you what the French were doing at Calais? Your people never asked our permission when they started to bore on this side; why should we ask theirs because we’re coming here? Fine times, my boy, when the shaft is through! We’ll have a French Lord Mayor of London by-and-by, just to show ’em how to do it! And I’ll be even with some on this side—you first of all, for sneaking round after my brains.”

Temper began to play with him; but I bent my own to his mood.

“Don’t let’s have another brawl,” was my plea. “Am I the man to care for threats? My friends will be after me to-morrow, and will want to know something about this house. I think you had better

let some one else show them round. They might not be civil if they found you here. And the police will ask questions."

He laughed ironically.

"The police be d—d! What do they know about it? Do you think we're children with pap-bottles, or what? Let 'em come, and I'll do the honours myself. Can't a gentleman make a lake in his grounds if he likes. I'm the master in this house, and I'll do what I please with it. My present fancy is for a lake. Shift lots of ground, siree, and go a long way down. But I wish I knew what the devil to do with you. You're just a bad egg, and no doubt about it."

The words surprised him to a confession I had not looked for. It was evident that he did not then contemplate the surer way of shutting my lips.

"No," he continued, and temper spoke again, "I can't kill you, sonny—I haven't got the pluck, and that's the straight truth. There's plenty here that would, and, maybe, will by-and-by. But I'll give you time to think of it, any way. Make your mind easy—Robert Jeffery is an honourable man. We're all honourable men, so help me thunder! and no kid-gloved butterfly is going to steal my brains, I'll take my oath."

It was odd to see the way this supposition of a theft kept cropping up at every turn. It would become a mania later on, I foresaw. Who would answer such arguments seriously?

"Well," I said, "oaths don't help a man much

nowadays. A little common sense goes much farther. Why don't you think it all over? If I were in your place, the first question I should ask myself would be one concerning Alfred Hilliard's friends. Are you quite sure that he was alone this afternoon?"

He looked at me under his shaggy brows, and I knew that I had not frightened him.

"I'll ask that and more to-morrow," he said determinedly; "it's about time you were thinking of bed, sonny. Hungry, did you say? Well, we've got some good bread and cheese in the house. This old universe wouldn't be such a bad place if we were all fed on bread and cheese and good 'cold spring.' Say, you're doing a service to humanity when you eat it, and don't forget your grace—it's bad manners. Good-night, my son—if the coffee is poisoned, let me know to-morrow, and I'll hold an inquest. And, by the heaven above me, if you raise that voice of yours more than a whisper, I'll knock your brains out!"

He flung open the door at the words, and, snatching up the lamp, permitted me to see the upper landing and those who waited for him there. They were Frenchmen, eight or ten of them, in as honest corduroy as ever ploughboy wore. I understood his new courage when I saw them, and why he had not feared to keep the door unlatched. A fool alone would hope for liberty by that road.

"Pleasant dreams, chum," he cried again, as he went out and locked the door after him. "Don't

frighten yourself—we shall hear if you knock. And I'll send the bread and cheese up by-and-by. *Au revoir*, my boy, and mind you're up early in the morning."

I did not reply with as much as a single word, but sat, in utter darkness, while I could hear his footsteps and the footsteps of others upon the stairs below. When all was silent again I began to grope for the bed. A great sense of fatigue and loneliness came upon me, and I had the desire to sleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Silent Army

THE night was long, the longest of my life. Sleep refused to befriend me; nor sleeping had I any rest. What food they had sent up to me at nine o'clock (for I heard the great gong again) lay untouched upon the plate. The steaming cup of coffee frightened me. I did not dare to drink it, though I had the thirst of fever. The jest had made of it a death-draught. Such light as two inches of candle gave (that much they set upon the tray) failed at last and left me in utter darkness. I dreamed of an army of Frenchmen, an endless army coming up out of the pit in the gardens of the house.

The day of doubt was passed, the night of truth was with me. I was justified of the dream: twice justified. For who, but those who made it, could say where the tunnel from Escalles began and where it ended? who in England knew one word about it? If it had been carried one mile under the Channel, why not ten or twenty, or even twenty-three? I had set foot in the first tube of it, and had heard a distant sound of throbbing, as

of an engine working many miles away. But I knew no more than the dead how many years the Frenchmen had been at work at Escalles, nor at what speed the boring machine, of which Jeffery boasted, could cut away the chalk of the sea-bed. It might be that the beginning of this mighty labour was to be found in the record of the last decade, when we, ourselves, spoke of a tunnel to France and the French were silent. It might be that their task was almost accomplished, and that they had but to break through the door of earth to the very grounds of the house which prisoned me, to find their passage free, the road for their outposts ready. And what then? what then? Ah! the brain burned when I put that question.

The dream showed me a lonely house, and in the gardens of the house a great shaft, and from the shaft a silent army emerging silently. Elsewhere, said my soldier's instinct, a feint of landing upon English shores had drawn our forces from the place. There had been an alarm at Pevensey, at Lowestoft, in the marshes of Essex. No English general so much as thought of Dover, of its harbour or its deserted down-lands. And while our ships were steaming eastward, westward, to Plymouth and the Nore, these mighty, unnumbered hosts came up out of the very earth to the gardens of my country and the homes which lay beyond them. It was as though some hand of iron closed my mouth and held it dumb while the desire to cry the tidings became as a raging fever. Again and



"The dream showed me a lonely house and fire
shaft, a silent army em
Pro Patria

again, in that terrible sleep, I counted the serried companies which were ever vomited from the earth and poured over the Downs, there to entrench themselves upon the heights and to wait the day with confidence. To-morrow these outposts would, in their thousands, hold the camp for those that followed after. Day and night, day and night the rolling trains steamed below the frothing waters of the Channel to cast out their human freight upon the grassy down, and to make sure this surprising treachery. One hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, more and ever more, who should limit the number of the men or say, Here is the last of them? In a single night an advance guard strong enough to hold the hills could pass up from the tunnel's mouth and make good its foothold. And once the key was held, what force of ours might hope to shut the gate again? Never did a man know, in the face of defeat, the mental agony which this picture of the dream could compel me to suffer. Neither sleeping nor waking, I watched for the lingering day and the first message of the light which the boarded windows might give me. I was impotent, dumb, caged at an hour of hours when a man would have given all that life had for him to have uttered but a single word to England and the cities. God! it was a terrible dream, which I must live through many a night yet before the end could be.

I knew not, I say, how far their tunnel was carried, neither by what authority this work in Kent

was done, nor what was the progress made in the gardens of the house. In the uncertainty lay the torture of the dream. Sooner or later, said the voice of Hope, your friends will discover you; to whom the voice of the Despairer answered, They will never discover you, for these men will kill you. If I feared death, I can say it on my conscience that I feared it less for myself than for that silence which must follow upon it. The hazard that the tunnel might even then be an accomplished fact began to be a mania of the mind, thrusting itself between every brighter ray of argument, forbidding even that factor of time and the chances of time which alone could help me now. For why should a house be taken upon our shores at all if the work from Escalles were not so near to completion that days rather than months were necessary to finish it? Even a child's logic would have read as much of the story of the house and of those who occupied it. Whether upon the invitation of private individuals or of the Government in France, Jeffery and his chosen engineers had come to Dover to join hands with those who pushed under the sea from Cape Gris-Nez. One word of alarm in England would shatter that ambition, even at this hour. I said that the word would never be spoken by me, and, saying it, beheld the dawn-light winging into my room; and I knew that the day had come at length—it might be the last day that I should live to dream or to awake.

They brought me breakfast, good coffee and some

fish, at eight o'clock; and ravenous hunger drove me to the meal. If they would have done with me this way, well, let it be so, said Resignation; for a man can die but once, and when they wished my death they could accomplish it at their leisure. So I ate recklessly, seeking to draw the Frenchman, who served me, into talk; but failing ignominiously; for he was silent as a judge's clerk, and when he would ask a question a grotesque gesture helped him to it.

By-and-by he left me, locking the door behind him; but shortly before twelve o'clock Jeffery himself came up to the room and, entering it without any ceremony, began to bargain with me for my silence. He was quite sober now, curt, taciturn, and very open. I answered him as briefly as he questioned me, for I had expected something of the sort.

"Now, Captain," he said, throwing himself upon the bench and crossing his legs impatiently, "what's it to be, light or dark? a first-floor parlour or this dog-kennel? You've only got to name it, you know?"

"Put plainly, you want my parole?"

"Exactly. Give us your word to behave as a gentleman, and not to go away from here even if you see the door open, and we'll do the handsome thing by you. Is it on?"

"It's very much off—I wonder you waste time."

"Oh, I'm always glad to play the good Christian. What says the proverb? An eye for an eye, even

if it's a glass one. You can't mend matters here, not if you'd the voice of the great Mumbo Jumbo. Why not reckon it up? Good food and good quarters until we're through with it. We shan't be long, my boy—a month at the most, perhaps. If the gang on the other side were ready, I'd be quicker. But that's the way with the Froggies. Give 'em an inch and they'll make a hell. They can't even manage my old "corkscrew" if I turn my back for twenty hours. Say, you thought you'd got a bead on me there. Some day I'll show you her ladyship when she's bored this bit of a rat-hole. I'll be a rich man then, Captain Alfred—a rich man, *saves*? And you'll be—well, God knows. There are gentlemen across yonder who'll have a finger in your pie for what you did at Escalles. I'm sorry for you, young man."

"Keep your sympathy," said I. "You'll want it by-and-by. Have you asked yourself what your chance is worth? A new farthing! Not more. I'd as soon believe in a machine for flying to the moon. To-day or to-morrow your friends, the police, will be in here. It will be my turn to do the laughing then.

He passed the threat by and repeated his first question.

"Leave the police to me, young fellow. What they learn at the River Bottom House they're welcome to. It's you that I'm thinking of. Are you going to suffocate up here, or try your luck in a Waldorf-Astoria downstairs? Name it, and be

quick; for I guess I can't waste my breath on you. Is it off or on?"

"It is off—absolutely, finally."

"Then look out for yourself, Alfred Hilliard. We'll make it warm for you—oh, you bet."

For a moment he stood as though hesitating, and then left the room abruptly, slamming the door after him. I saw no more of him that day nor for many days after. The old Frenchman, who brought my meals, came regularly to the room, but spoke only in gestures. Within the house itself I could hear each day at dawn the tramp of many feet, the chosen going out to the works. At dusk they came again as they had gone, and silence—utter, profound—reigned in that world of mystery. Convinced now that I should suffer no greater harm than that of the close and debilitating confinement, I began to think that some hand more discreet was controlling even Jeffery and those with him in the work. I had been trapped, and should be held to the end; but my life was not sought, nor would it be while I remained the acquiescing prisoner of the garret. And, you may be sure, there was no scheme of escape, no plan or plot or hope of liberty, that my mind did not turn over in those lingering hours of despair. How many hours I sought to locate the tower and its environment, and vainly! For I was watched as never man was watched yet; and even a movement toward the windows would open the door behind me and bring my old jailor into the room.

"Monsieur, monsieur," he would say, "do not think—do not do it. They will shoot—kill. There are others, *là-bas*; they watch, they wait. Have a care, monsieur, for your life's sake."

It was, I think, the first word he ever spoke to me. I know that it was a true word, and I did not distrust the old man who uttered it. For what could I hope in that den, if it were not that eternal hope of England which is our goodly heritage?

CHAPTER XXIV

“ I Remember ”

I HAD been the close prisoner of the River Bottom House for seven days, when there came to me a surprise of the monotony, which was so unlooked for that I remember the moment of it before any incident of that surpassing week. It was early still in the morning, when old Boisdeffre (for such I have learned was my jailor's name) entered my room for the second time within an hour (a very unusual occurrence with him), and approaching me with more deference than usual, civil old man that he was, uttered an invitation so strange that I did not at first believe my ears.

“ Monsieur,” he cried, “ there are those who wish to see you, *là-bas*, in the *salon*. You are to go down, if you please.”

I stared at the old fellow in blind amazement. He had been dreaming too, then !

“ Go down, old Boisdeffre ? Do you mean it ? ”

“ It is an order, monsieur. Have the goodness to make haste and follow me. They wait for you.”

He threw open the door and held it back while I

passed him, to light and air and all the excitements of his surprise. Even out there, upon the threshold of liberty and the day, I could not so much as imagine one fact of that astonishing truth. What conjurer had done this? I asked myself, as I stood, hesitating and doubtful, on the broad landing of the house. Who was there to give an order which old Boisdeffre obeyed? Had Harry come at last, or Mallinson, or one of the men who had laughed at me in London a month ago? As I live, I could scarcely walk or follow Boisdeffre, for the amazing hope of it. Long days of the twilight, nights of darkness, and the dreams had so played upon me that I had neither nerve nor strength left. I went as a man groping for the way. Who could be in the *salon* below?

It was a wide staircase, oak-panelled and very old. The columns of the pillars were worm-eaten, scratched, and decayed; but the stairs were thickly carpeted with felt, and pictures, chiefly portraits, hung in many of the niches. I found myself at last upon a broad landing, over whose banisters I could peep to a square *entresol* below; nor did I fail to remark the figures of two men who sat upon a bench by a great stained-glass window, and appeared to be talking at hazard, unconscious of my presence. As they guarded the staircase, so did others watch the doors and gates below—the inference was elementary. Even old Boisdeffre read that which was in my mind, and would have recalled me from it.

"The *salon* is here, monsieur ; please to enter."

He knocked upon the door of a room by his left hand, and a soft, well-modulated voice cried "*Entrez !*" I should have recognised the speaker anywhere by that single word, uttered so pleasingly ; and I knew that Colonel Lepeletier was the man. Hope went out with the knowledge, but a certain pleasure (for there was never a truer gentleman) followed me to the interview. At least, the Colonel would seek to talk of justice and of honour, for these were known to him.

It was a long, low apartment, once a bedroom, I imagined, and now turned to the purposes of a general living-room. So bright was the sunshine of that September day that it blinded my eyes when I entered there, and gave me confused images of heavy oaken furniture and garish windows and green trees beyond them and the figure of a stooping old man sitting at a writing-table. When I could see more clearly, I recognised the Colonel, in spite of his sober frock coat and the glasses which helped him to write ; but that which was the unexpected thing, so unexpected that a thousand guesses would not have found it, was the presence of another, of Agnes herself, sitting in a low chair by one of the windows, with such a look of despair upon her pretty face that I forgot my own story upon the instant and was all curiosity to hear her.

"Mademoiselle Agnes !" I cried at last ; but she stopped me with a little gesture, inviting me to

speak first to her father. Colonel Lepeletier stood up at the same moment and held out his hand.

"Captain Hilliard," he said, "believe me that I deplore the circumstances of this meeting."

I hesitated a moment, and then shook hands with him. After all, he was the creature of trickery and not of malice.

"Deploring them," I said, "you have, doubtless, come here to change them, Colonel?"

He retorted honestly, neither flinching nor excusing himself.

"To the point where your interests and my country's do not engage, I am here to serve you, Captain. Beyond that I cannot go. Let us begin upon such an understanding. I have come to help you if I can. It will be your own fault if I do not succeed. Please to sit down; you are tired, I see."

He indicated a chair by his table, and so placed me that my eyes were turned away from the window by which Agnes sat. But her face haunted me even though I could not see it; and I thought of her and of the gardens beyond the window, and fell to wondering if I should ever go out with her to the world again.

"Colonel," I said, beginning as I should have begun at Calais three months ago, "you refused me your confidence once—do you refuse it here at Dover?"

He waived the objection aside with the air of a man accustomed to command.

"Let the past be the past," he cried earnestly. "We were both the subjects of delusion—you, in believing that I was as these people who own this house; I, in attributing to you motives upon which you did not act. Much has happened since then, Captain Hilliard—much that I neither wished nor foresaw. The work, which was begun by the enterprise of a Government, has been almost completed by the money and the daring of private individuals. Understand me. When the Ministry at Paris permitted the engineers to carry their shaft under the sea, they did it as a tentative experiment, to be pursued some day when nations are governed by reason and justice, and England fears no longer to be linked to France."

"She fears nothing of France," I said, ineptly, perhaps, but in one of those outbursts of a soldier's pride which I am ever unable to control when my country is named. The word of Agnes alone saved that maladroit challenge.

"Oh, I beg," she cried, speaking for the first time, "hear my father now."

The Colonel continued, oblivious of the interruption.

"My daughter is wise, Captain Hilliard. Hear me to the end, and then judge me. Our Government, I say, permitted an experiment at Calais; but the intrigues and the money of those who hope for a king in France and a throne in England have made that experiment a fact, and have done a work which, I know not, may carry my country

to ruin or to a position she has never occupied among the nations. The work that is done in this house, is done, not by France, but by men of France who believe that they work for her none the less surely because they work alone. It has been your misfortune and mine, God knows how greatly, that you have come between the worker and his ambitions. But ambition prevails, and your own task, which I, as a soldier, may call a very noble task, is become impossible. Accept the situation which you cannot mend, and agree that you have done your best."

"I will never accept it—while I live, Colonel."

I looked at Agnes when I answered him, and saw that she had turned away to sit with her face hidden from me. But I knew what the words meant to her, and I thought I heard her voice when I had done. The Colonel, nevertheless, continued to speak.

"For the outrages offered to you here, I apologise and will atone. A clever man is not necessarily a gentleman, though his cleverness should make him one. You have been badly treated, and reparation must be made. It is to see that all is carried on here in a way that shall not prejudice my country's name, that the Government has sent me with such limited authority as the circumstances can give. In such a sense, I am no longer the ally of those who own this house. If it rested with me alone, I might even ask myself how I could open these doors and let you free; but there

are those who would call me a traitor to France, and that, by God's help, I will never be. Give me your word as an officer to remain here—until I can consult with my superiors, at any rate—and I will see that you are treated as a soldier and a gentleman. Frankly, and as man to man, it is the only course. You have done all that your country could ask of you, and more. Let Reason have her turn and accept the inevitable. I can give you no better advice in your interests and in my own. Some day these clouds may lift, and you and I may begin a happier friendship. I would change much that I prize of life for such a day and such an opportunity."

His voice sank almost to a whisper, and I saw that he was greatly moved. His plea was as much for himself as for me. He did not dare to open the gate to me; France would call him traitor.

"The day may be nearer than you think, Colonel," was my reply, when moments of silence had passed. "As for your question, there is but one answer to it. I go back to the garret. But I shall go with the knowledge that you, at least, are blameless. For the rest, ask yourself as a soldier what you would do in my place? Would you give your word or withhold it?"

He stood up and held out his hand to me.

"I salute an Englishman," he said.

He would have gone on, I believe, to have spoken more intimately to me in that moment; but there

came a knock upon the door, and his look of alarm was not to be misread. I understood that he wished to terminate the interview, and spoke to that end.

"I thank you for your sympathy, Colonel," I said; "there is only one word more, and it is this. Those who come to my country on such a work are madmen and not soldiers. I pay you the compliment of distinguishing you from them, both in act and word. When you need me in England, you may not find me less ready than you have proved. *A bon entendeur*. And to Mademoiselle——"

I turned to Agnes—she was still looking down upon the old walled garden and the tangled flowers which gave it a sheen of gold and crimson and all the fuller glory of the autumn. For a moment she did not seem to hear me, but when I was about to pass on she caught my hand suddenly in hers, and, bending her little head, she kissed it.

"I remember," she said—that and nothing more.

And I left her standing there, as a figure of the spring-time caught up suddenly in the sunshine; and this picture of her I carried to my darkened room and thought that it was dark no more.



CHAPTER XXV

I Quit the Garret

OLD BOISDEFFRE waked me early on the following morning and began to be very busy, bustling about as one who carried great tidings and was glad to tell them.

"Monsieur," he said, blurting it out at last with a splendour of gesture which delighted me, "they have prepared an apartment for you downstairs. Permit an old man to be happy. I am to follow you, monsieur."

I went with him, very readily, you may be sure, and glad as he was, both to leave that dismal prison of the garret and to justify Lepeletier. After all, Agnes's father was a soldier and a gentleman; and I had less to fear now that my case was in his hands than when it hung upon the caprice of the sometime madman, Jeffery. As for the new "apartment," if the outrage of my presence there were passed by, then had I little to complain of. Two small rooms, their windows heavily barred, their doors clamped with iron bars, were henceforth to be my lodging. They gave

upon the walled garden with the border of the gillyflowers; and I thought that I should often, in imagination, see Agnes standing there, the sentinel of my hope, as those, the Frenchmen at the gate, were the sentinels of my liberty.

But this was a note of fantasy, and elsewhere all was fact. Welcome as I might the new atmosphere and the spirit of it, the very meaning of the change came early to trouble me. Lepeletier had spoken of a month yet to be passed by me as a prisoner of the house. In a month, then, Jeffery's work would be done—the veil cast aside! And in a month my country would be in peril as she never had been before. Judge how rarely my thoughts were of myself or of that which I, one of the least of the servants of England, must suffer. Ay, in all verity, beyond any thought of light or liberty (if it were not for that which liberty might win), beyond even those conceits of my love which pictured Agnes in the garden, and would wing her voice to me upon the breezes of the day, was this terror of the truth; this belief that an Englishman's genius had at last permitted France to achieve her victory; that the pit indeed was dugged, the sea thrust back, the ramparts of my country cast down, it might be for ever. No longer could I doubt the way or the means, or those truths of the conspiracy which so long had baffled me. The Nationalists of France, I said, those unresting madmen who cried ever in the French capital for change and ferment and

revolution; who had never ceased to remember Fashoda, who had condemned Dreyfus to the living death; who would stake all to destroy the Republic when their own time came—these irreconcilables were the secret power; feeding Jeffery and his schemes with their money and their pledges; compelling the Government to permit the workings at Calais; themselves responsible for this surpassing hazard upon our shores; believing all, hoping all of the wildest scheme one nation has devised for the conquest of another—these were the true enemies, these the plotters, the Jew haters, the empire seekers, the dreamers, the fanatics, the unresting rabble of a dead society which ever asked for a new order, and, winning it, were dreamers and fanatics still. And I was one against their intent and agency, one to cry the tidings to my country, one to lay down my life if thereby the secret might be known. For what hope had I of these powers, before which even the Cabinet of France had compromised and lost courage? My life to them was not more precious than a leaf falling from a tree in the gardens of the house. To-day, to-morrow, they would kill me if they willed it, though a hundred Lepeletiers were sent from France to watch their emprise. The mercy they showed me was the mercy of their confidence. Their work was done, and I was impotent to undo it. A month, and my dream would be the terrible day for England and her people. I say again that I did not dare to think

of it, feared to admit the truth, lest I should lose my reason. For the Channel was England's rampart no more. Deep down beneath the waters the secret lay in darkness; to-morrow the doors of it might be opened and the daylight shine therein. Let me pass the thought and the suffering of it. Had I to live such days again, I would account death a mercy, even now, when one stands heart to heart with me in the knowledge of that love by which life is.

I could see the gardens of the house, I say, from the windows of my rooms, and beyond them a belt of trees, and the hills which are the highlands of Thanet. By here and there, through remote vistas, workmen passed with wheelbarrows, and picks upon their shoulders; and sometimes, when the day was very still, I could hear the clanging chains of a crane, the snorting of some little engine, and, in the hush of mystery, the mighty throbbing which had awed me long weeks ago at Calais. Whatever the work that was being done in the garden, many hands contributed to it; for I saw fresh workers always, and they were French for the most part, in spite of the honest corduroys they wore. Imagination showed me these men at their work in the dell of the thicket; it showed me the open shaft going downwards to the tunnel which France thrust out from Escalles; it shaped for me the excuses which Jeffery made to the few neighbours who could trouble him with their inquisitions. A rich man building a lake in his grounds! Who

would forbid, who say him nay? If the police came to the River Bottom Farm, what story could they carry away from it? Would they, looking down into a pit which these Frenchmen had digged, so much as imagine one paltry possibility which came of such a labour, or find in it one shadow of excuse for act or word against the owner of the house? I knew that they would not—I knew that one man alone, Harry, my friend, might make his voice heard; and he was silent, he must be silent, or why did I remain there, a prisoner of the farm? Ay, I had a hundred excuses for Harry, but never a guess at the truth. He would not forget me—perchance the same hand which had struck at me had struck him down. I could but wait and hope on, as men will, even though the hour is the last they have to live.

They were sunny days, those days of the terror in that kindly month of September; and I began, I think, to count them at last as a schoolboy counts the days which intervene before holiday must come. That Jeffery was no longer in Kent I felt assured; for old Boisseffre did not so much as name him, and the better treatment Lepeletier had ordered for me was pursued and even improved upon by my honest old jailor. I had a longing for the sun and the air, it is true, and the torture of the confinement was not to be mitigated by the vista of the autumn's reddening woodlands seen from the windows of my room; but the food

was good, and old Boisdeffre and I would gossip, and he would tell me stories of the Commune, and I the stories of my college days; and, neither understanding wholly, we would laugh together and say that nations quarrel while the peoples are friends. Once, I remember, I sought to beg a newspaper of him—a step toward a deeper design which began to come into my mind; but he excused himself with the old plea, and his gesture was as delightful as ever.

“Do not think of it, monsieur; there are those who seek an excuse. Do not help them; they watch always; there is no hope for that; they are too clever; they would be glad of it, monsieur, glad as I should be sorry. Let us go on as we go now. It is wiser, safer. And the chief comes back to-day. For God’s sake do not anger him, monsieur.”

I expressed no surprise, nor pursued the argument, for I knew that he spoke of Jeffery’s return, and an hour had not passed when the door of my room was burst open violently and Jeffery himself came staggering towards me with an incoherent word upon his lips. He wore a travelling cape and a little cap to match; but his face had the old malign expression, and I understood that this was one of those moods of anger and of madness which Boisdeffre so greatly feared. But I was not afraid of him, neither then nor at any hour of it; and to my contempt I hold that my salvation is to be set down.

He stood before me, and for a little while his temper was so masterful that he could not utter a coherent word, but swayed from side to side and clenched his fists and looked murder, if ever a man looked it in this world. When at last he could speak, a tremendous effort brought him to the old manner, and he was like an animal purring with pleasure of his prey.

"So, my son, you've changed your quarters, eh? made yourself nice and tidy, have you? By —, you're a man that don't care much about your life, do you?"

I said not a word, but stood close up to him, for I thought that he meant a blow. The defiant attitude kept him at arm's length. He took a step backwards and turned to Boisdeffre.

"You hound!" he cried savagely. "What do you mean by this?"

Old Boisdeffre was as white as death, but he could speak for himself, nevertheless.

"The Colonel's order, monsieur; the Ministry sent him to England; he is at Folkestone still. Write to him and ask."

"I'll cut his tongue, by —! Who's master, do you think? Whose house is it? Did he do the work or did I? The Lord blind him who sent him this road!"

He raised his cane and struck the old fellow a heavy blow across the forehead. As they closed together, locking arms and hands, they rolled through the open door, and it was shut in my face as I

sprang to the old man's help; but in the same moment, looking down into the garden, I beheld Lepeletier himself there, and I knew that he and Jeffery would meet and that the understanding would be then or never. And as God witnesses, it came to me suddenly that by the anger and madness I might come to the light; and that, before the hour was passed, the questions I had so often asked would be answered for ever.

For it was life or death for me then; even as it was life or death for one of the two that met in the garden.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Meeting in the Garden

THE men would meet, the one young in anger and savage mania; the other a broken old man, who, willy-nilly, had been drawn to this mad emprise. As I watched the Colonel, standing there in the garden with the sunshine upon his kindly face, the fatality of the hour fascinated me beyond all words. Jeffery, the madman, would kill him, I said. And he, all unconscious, was coming on to meet the assassin, a pathetic figure of that autumn day, with all the old gentleness and courtesy of deed and manner that had won my friendship at the first. Desire and will to help him began to prove stronger even than any hope for my country that might come of that encounter. For how could I remember anything else but this fact, that a soldier walked blindly there to insult, if not to death? One word might save his life. I took a heavy ornament from the mantelpiece, and, the window of my room being bolted to the casement, I smashed the glass with a blow. Then I cried twice to Lepelletier to look out for himself—and Jeffery entered the garden.

There was a Frenchman at my elbow (one I had never seen before) almost with the crashing of the glass, and others stood in the doorway; but high words in the garden arrested them, and, it being plain that I had made no attempt to escape, they all stood with me to watch the scene below the windows. Colonel Lepeletier himself, a bent figure no longer, but one upright and bold as that of any trooper, listened to Jeffery's angry complaints with a disdain which every gesture made more sure. The half-caste, in his turn, trembled with rage and anger uncontrollable; and his speech, at the first wild and blasphemous, became anon almost a scream of defiance and insult. To Lepeletier, as to me, the mad plea was the same. We had conspired to rob him of his machine, we were allies together to that end. The Colonel, he cried, had betrayed France, was the traitor in their camp who should hang in Paris presently. It was then that the soldier raised his cane and struck him.

A loud cry, an oath, a scuffle, and the men were locked as in some devilish embrace from which death alone should deliver them. I saw them reeling, bending, striking; I heard Jeffery's savage oaths—I knew by a sure instinct what the end must be. For it was youth against age, madness against sanity, the knave against the gentleman—and the knave must win. Impulse to go down to the aid of a brave man surged up at last as a force of will irresistible; but there were two of the guards upon me at the first step toward the door, and when the

three of us staggered to our feet again, bloody and dusted from head to foot, one man alone stood up in the garden. That man was Robert Jeffery, who held an Italian poniard in his left hand, and cleaned the blade of it with a wisp of the grass.

The Colonel had fallen full in the sunlight, his head half buried in those very gillyflowers he tended not an hour ago; his cane broken beneath him; his collar torn from his throat. A crimson stain spread and glistened upon his linen and made a black patch upon the right sleeve of his grey coat. He did not move nor appear to breathe. The men with me in the room remained there a little while, as though robbed of their faculties! but presently a bell rang loudly in the hall below, and they went away all together. In my turn, I stood at the window as one afraid to see or to know. God, what would come of it? how would their crime be cloaked? what would little Agnes say or do to-night? For my first thought was of her—a thought of sorrow so great that even a man might have sanctified it with tears. She stood alone now—a child against the world. And I should never see her more.

The body lay out in the sunshine, and no man came near it. There was confusion in the house, the tramping of feet, the angry note of voices, a going to and fro between the farm and the woods. The work in the grounds appeared to have ceased upon the instant. I beheld many of the engineers coming quickly out of the thicket, and all together they went to the rooms below. But to the pleasure-

garden no one turned ; nor did any appear to remember the dead or seek to hide the body. Some greater, graver peril menaced them, I said. For one instant, beyond the veil of the doubt, I perceived a light to shine, but would not look at it. It could not be that—that ultimate hope which should send me to the world again ! A thousand chances stood against the thought—it could not be !

I breathed the quicker for daring to think of it, and tried to shut the bloody figure of the garden from my eyes ; but all unavailingly. Some evil power of the desire to see kept me pacing the room, unrestingly ; driven now to the shadows where the thing was hidden from my sight ; now to the window again to be sure that the body had not moved nor life returned to it. What cruelty left the dead man there, those below alone could answer. Did they fear nothing that their victim lay in the grounds, uncovered, untended, unburied, for the first stranger to discover and to rush affrighted with the tale upon his lips ? The greater witness, I said, that the garden was watched as no garden of Kent before or since. Even a blow upon my window had fetched the watchers to my side—no word, I knew, could be spoken in that house but some ready ear would catch it. What folly, then, to believe that the secret of the garden would be read by hostile eyes. There was no hope of that ; only the enduring pity of death ; the pity which those must ever win who go before us to the eternal mysteries.

I imagined that the secret lay safe, I say ; but, nevertheless, the desire of its discovery made the hours of that fateful day the longest I had endured in all those weary weeks of doubt and waiting. There was no minute of the lingering afternoon which found me willing to think of food or rest, or even of the danger which Lepeletier's death might bring to my door. I, at least, had been a witness of the deed, and sooner or later they would silence me ; but for the meantime their loud voices, their hurried footsteps spoke of panic among themselves ; and in their panic all my hope of safety lay. When, about the hour of sundown, a new stillness fell upon the house, and the clamour of the voices ceased, I was as much afraid of the silence as erstwhile I had been of the outcry. What new turn had stilled their tongues ? I asked ; why did none come near me ? Were they contemplating my death, or was the greater peril at hand—the final peril as I had witnessed it in my dream ? As I live and write, it came to me in that dreadful hour that the work was done which linked England to France, and that the armies of France might even then be marching below the Channel seas. In fear I heard the phantom steps ; the earth below me quaked as with a new sound which man had never heard before. It was the end, I said, the end inevitable—the last day of the dreams which had come to me since first I passed the gate at Escalles and knew the secret.

Darkness fell a little early that afternoon, and

after a glorious red-gold sunset, which made the leaves of the creepers about my windows seem to drip with blood, and struck upon the face of the dead man as though to shroud it with a pall of fire, I quitted my window for a moment and went, I know not why, to the door of the room as though I would go straight out to the garden and there do that which others had feared to do. Not for an instant did I imagine that the door was unlocked, or that the sentinels were not, as ever they had been, upon the landing beyond; but when, without a thought of it, I put my hand upon the latch, the door opened at my touch; and there was the house before me, as still and silent and unpeopled, it appeared, as any house of the dead. There is no word at my command to express the mingled emotions of prudence and joy to which this discovery moved me. Freedom! My God! was it that? Had the French, indeed, withdrawn covertly from the house and left me there with the body? or was it but a trap, after all, and were those, who wished my death, in the shadows of the darkened hall below? Caution (and many have charged me with that) sent me back to the shelter of the room headlong. I thought that there were men upon the stairs; many men waiting in the darkness for my passing. The desire was rather to shut myself away from them; and I closed the door of my room and set a heavy chair against it. Outside in the garden the twilight fell quickly as the clouds of storm gathered in the fleecy sky above the down-

lands. I could scarcely discern the body of Oscar Lepeletier, and long I strained my eyes, peering out over that lonely garden; but the body was gone—I was sure of it at last. They had carried the dead man away while I stood wondering upon the empty staircase.

This new discovery, the open door, the enduring silence which made the moaning wind the melancholy cry of the night, which set me starting at every leaf that beat against my window-pane, were the last blows upon my courage and my purpose. Remember that I was long without food or drink—old Boisdreffre had failed me since the morning, and for now I sat, fearful as I had never been, helpless, without idea, in the gathering darkness of my room. Who, then, had carried the body away? I asked. There were men in the house still, or the work would have remained undone? And those men waited for me in the silent corridors below. Or had they, indeed, gone to the tunnel's mouth; and, anon, would those gardens awake to the tramp of countless feet; be alive with the presence of the hosts of France; witness the beginning of the dreadful day? Ay, think of it as I thought then. The open door! Liberty so near. Death at hand as I passed the danger by. Do you wonder that I shrank back, more fearful of the truth than of the peril which surrounded me. For if the truth were this, then had England's hour of trial come at last to deliver her for ever, or for ever to cast her down.

A full hour passed, and I did not move from my

prison or seek to dare the darkness of the hall below. There is a silence of a lonely house unlike any silence that you may find even in the remotest country or the thickest forest; a silence which makes minutes of the hours; in which you can number every breath you take; when the tick of a clock is like a human voice; when you imagine other sounds, muted steps upon the stairs, shadowy figures about you; the shapes of those who have lived and died, hoped and schemed in the very room you occupy. Such a silence I knew in the River Bottom House in that hour of vigil which came with the night. A hundred times I thought to hear men upon the stairs and even to detect their movements as they waited in the darkness. Every whisper of the wind carried a new warning—the note of a weird voice crying to me from the world without. Strained ears, seeking the truth from the wood beyond the garden, sent me again and again to the broken glass of my window to listen for those whom any minute might betray—the first of the armies of France debouching from the very earth to the shores of England. What matter of surprise if I peopled those woods already with the fitting apparitions which a brain overwrought could shape for me. I believed that I saw the hosts of France, and, believing, I said that all was lost.

And thus it was for a full hour at the least—this overmastering dread of the house and the silence of the night. Long without food, enervated by weeks of close confinement, the neighbour of ap-

prehension often, I marvel how it came at last that I had courage to quit my room and to take a few steps, hesitatingly, down toward the mystery and the darkness below. Yet so it befell; and when the hour was over, and the gong below struck nine o'clock, I found myself driven by some new impulse away from the window and the moonlit garden (where I fancied still to see Lepeletier's body), down to the hall, and to that knowledge which could not surpass the terror of the doubt. If men waited there (as the voice of Prudence argued), the voice of Curiosity said, Better the men than the silence. That which I had to fear from them was as greatly to be feared in the room as face to face with them in the hall below. And so I went, stealthily, with a heavy hand upon the balustrade and a heart pumping like an engine. Remember what I had seen, and judge me with generosity.

Stair by stair, step by step, now drawing back when a banister creaked, now starting at the touch of a figure of stone, anon taking courage and going quickly, I came down at last to a floor of flags where the fanlight of a door showed a ray of the moon's beams, and the clear heaven above the gardens had all the aspect of a vista of stageland. Here I stood for a full minute, listening with a good ear for the sound even of a man breathing—it may be, beginning to believe in the tremendous hope that I might be alone in the house, the forgotten prisoner of those who had fled. And while

I stood, the ultimate fear came upon me, for I knew at last that I was not alone; and when I put out my hand, the hand of another, cold as death and clammy to the touch, caught my fingers in a grip of iron, and I was thrown suddenly backward upon the flags. And so for a full minute I lay half stunned, nor could I hear the breathing of the man who had thrown me.

The minute passed; there was a shuffling of feet in the hall, the clang of an iron door, and then light. I looked up to find myself alone with Jeffery, who carried a lantern in his hand.

CHAPTER XXVII

A Jangling Bell

HE held a lantern in his hand, and wore the rough clothes of his calling, smeared with mud and grease, and white with the chalk of the pit. Feeble as the rays of the candle were, they showed me many doors giving off the hall; and the greater door of the house, barred and bolted as the gate of a prison. I lay within a foot of this door, and beyond it was liberty. The man read my thoughts, and they pleased his drunken humour.

"Going to your friends outside, eh, Captain? Well, I guess not. If it's hell, we're on the road together. Get up, my boy—I want a word with you."

He whipped a revolver from his hip-pocket and covered me with it. I could see the reflection of the light running down the barrel as a jet of golden water. Elsewhere there was utter silence. For a reason I had no measure of, his friends had fled the house. We were alone together; and I knew that one of us would not be alive to-morrow.

"A dozen words, if you like," said I, playing his own part while I could.

He set the lantern down and opened a door upon his left hand. When he had closed the shutters upon the windows he came back and invited me to follow him. Within the room there was all the confusion of a flight—drawers turned out, chairs at hazard, rubbish upon the table.

"So," he cried (and his air was that of a man who had a hundred things to think of and all of them pressing), "so you got the story out, eh, my boy? What did you give Boisdreffre—the hound!—what did you give him?"

I sat down upon a sofa, for I was still dizzy with the fall, and tried to hide from him all that his confession meant to me. But in my ears the words rang loudly, "The story is out." Great God! what had he said?

"Charge Boisdreffre with nothing," I cried; "he knows as much about it as you do. He was always faithful to your interests. You won't be able to say that of many to-morrow."

"To-morrow, good God! All my life has been to-morrow!"

I did not pity him, but understood that desperate cry.

"Whose fault is that?" I asked unsympathetically. "You had your chances; some of us don't get them. When you came over here you knew what you risked. I told you so at Calais; I tell you so again to-night. Leave the place and forget it.

You have no choice. To-morrow others will have their say. I shouldn't wait for them if I were you."

He looked at me cynically, cocking and uncocking the pistol as though he had forgotten it.

"You'd have made a good parson, Alfred Hilliard, by the Lord, you would. When I first saw you at Calais I took you for one of the whisky-and-soda sort—wine and roses and women, and more clothes at home than your man could steal. You went one better, I guess. You've a d——d obstinate head of your own, I'm thinking, and you're like the rest of 'em, quick enough to dance when the drums begin. Will it help you, boy? Ay, ask that. The shaft's down there below Dover. If we don't open it to-day, we'll open it to-morrow. What's the gain to you? One year or three—I'll bring the French up on Dover cliffs yet, if I give my life to it."

"A good many have done that—Napoleon was one of them. I'd find another vocation, Jeffery—it would pay better. You were an Englishman yourself once. Do you never remember that?"

A hard expression came upon the man's face. He rocked to and fro upon his heels as a man half dizzy. What his true thoughts were that night, God knows.

"Yes," he said presently, "I remember it, Alfred Hilliard—an Englishman, hounded out for being as God made him. Well, we'll write it off some day. You and I can do something that way to-night. Say, boy, did you think I was going to open the door."

"I thought you would be wise to."

"Ah, for you to walk right out to the little French girl at Folkestone! Nice and pretty, Captain. The pair of you billing and cooing while I go under. And my brains to find the money. Oh, I like that, Captain Alfred; that's my line all over. Say, do you know the police are outside this house now?"

My heart gave a leap; I could have shouted at his news; but the will to risk nothing kept me passive before him.

"What else do you expect?" I asked. "Do you suppose this sort of thing is to be done without raising some one's curiosity? Of course they are here. I wonder they didn't come a month ago. If you hadn't been blind, you'd have seen it from the first."

He nodded his head as though acquiescing.

"I told them it would not be the first time. We shall find another story next turn and another house. And you won't be alive to draw a woman into it. No, by ——, I'll look after her when I'm through with you."

I could have struck him down then, as much for the unspoken insult as for the manner of his threat; but all the overmastering reaction, the knowledge that the story was told, that my country, for the day at least, was saved, kept my mind at such a tension of fever that I had no other wish than to hear his confession to the end.

"Alive or dead, I don't count," was my response.

"Remember that you are at Dover and not at Calais. It makes all the difference to-night, Jeffery. There is still the sea to cross."

The taunt awakened him to a new outburst.

"How do you know," he cried loudly, "how do you know that the French are not coming through this very minute? Listen, lad; what sound is that? Is it troops or the night wind? You can't tell—gosh! you play the pretty fool when I wish it."

He raised his hand for silence, and I listened with ear intent. There were men moving in the gardens; you could count their footsteps. The house was surrounded; but by whom? I knew no more than the dead whether the man I talked to were playing the jester or the madman. Yet what suspense and fear hung upon the truth!

"It appears," I said at last (and, I am sure, with as white a face as ever woman carried out of church), "it appears that the police are before their time. Don't you think you'd better anticipate them?"

He treated it with a gesture of defiance.

"When they come," he snarled, "they'll find a pair of us, sonny—you on one side the fender and me on the other. Pretty picture, eh? Do you think I'm fool enough to live over the day that sees my work go under? No, by the Lord above me, I've attempted the biggest thing man ever set his hand to, and I've shown my masters that I can do it. If it's nothing to have done that much, very well; but the world may call it otherwise. What

are your idlers worth—your singing birds, who never see the scissors on their hair; your fiddle scrapers, who kiss the women; your ranters in Parliament and your ranters out of it? What good do they do? Is the world richer for them? I guess not. Wipe 'em all out to-morrow with decent tombstones, and you and I won't miss as much as a postage-stamp. No, sonny, it's the workers, the men who think in iron and steel, who make countries. Look at it any way—what's the sea against me and my shield? We roll her up as Pharaoh and the boys did wilderness way. Give me three days yet, and I'll land a hundred thousand men on your shores. Free or taken, I don't care a d—n for English or French or chimpanzee. I've done the work, and it'll stand your generation and your son's and your grandson's after that. There's no other living man that could have done it—an hey called me 'black,' the swine. Well, I'll wipe the ground with them some day, as I promised you. I did the work, and look at it—this house wouldn't have been searched until the day of judgment but for you and the petticoats that you couldn't keep clear of. Why did you cross my path—old 'Panther,' of Webb's, that didn't love you sixteen years ago and don't love you any more to-day? Why did you come in with your blasted curiosity and your lamb's mug and that bulldog tooth of yours which fixed at Escalles? Weren't there two roads in life; or did you find my road the prettier? Ah, Bobby Jeffery takes second place; he isn't good enough

for the white man. There isn't one of 'em living that could do his work, but he isn't good enough for 'em—too fond of a sip, like many another that has brains to feed and isn't pig's-meat. The drink did Bobby Jeffery, did it? But that's a lie, pal, a lie, as sure as you hear the boys in the garden yonder. Haven't I lived? Why, yes, I've done that; lived in what I saw and worked for, and the drink helped me. Say, sonny, have a glass now—it'll help us in what's to come. I never thought of it—God's truth! I was reckoning up your friends all the time."

Now, he had dropped into this strange, maudlin self-appreciation, for all the world as a man talking to himself with the sentimentality and candour of a drunken argument; nor could I interrupt him, for he told me a page of the story of the strangest life I have ever known. And never surely was tale related under circumstances so weird, or to a man with mind so confused. The wan light, the dark hall beyond the door, the shuttered room, the figure of the man, his bloodshot eyes, his hawk-like hands, his woolly hair—the maze-like labyrinth of his thought, now going straight to a heart of reason, now blindly to a *cul-de-sac* of self-appraisal; and upon all this the sure knowledge that at any moment he might seek my life, and that there were men in the gardens without—all this, I say, made an hour which neither I nor any man may ever find again in the whole book of the conspiracies. Wonder not that henceforth I believed no word of

his, was not surprised at any threat. I could but wait and watch with a resignation which amazes me when I recall it. Even when the man had his pistol upon the table and turned to a cupboard for glasses and a bottle, there was no thought of escape in my mind; though I sat up to watch him. But he read the movement otherwise, and turned upon me sharply. No Westerner in a tavern brawl could have whipped up his revolver so deftly.

"No," he snapped, "not that, Alfred Hilliard. Play the game. We're going through this thing together—play it as a pal."

I sat very still, amused almost at his notion of a compact.

"As you like," I said. "Your friends outside are not so patient. The game had better go quickly, or it will be a draw. Ha! they mean to come in, it appears."

A loud jangling bell rang out suddenly in a remote corridor of the empty house. I started to my feet at the sound, and could have counted my heart beating while we waited. He had a decanter in his hand, and he stood, without word or movement, listening to the sounds.

"Well," I asked at last, "are you going to open to them, or will you let them beat the door down? They will be inside in five minutes. What then? If it's worth anything, I'll do the best I can for you, but you haven't much time."

Again he did not answer me directly, but poured himself out a quantity of spirit and drank it at a

gulp. Some one beat loudly with a truncheon upon the great hall door, and Jeffery spoke as though in answer to the signal.

"Ay, knock away, you blasted idiot—there's more than a club wanted to raise my hinges. And where's the rest of you? Down under, maybe—ay, down under digging for my brains. Well, you shall find 'em, my boys. We'll go to hell together, every swine that comes here; we'll take a parlour-car, and no differences. Say, Alfred, laddie, did you think I was to be taken like an old hen sitting? No, you didn't think it. The black man's something in his head besides that—he was an Englishman once, eh?—well, he's going to be an Englishman now. He'll die quiet, sonny, as quiet as the best of 'em. And he'll take his brains with him. They had no room for 'em in this blasted country—they made a Frenchman of him! Well, he'll show 'em something yet—by the Lord who made him, he'll show 'em where his pals are coming through."

A louder knocking upon the outer door, the sound of a hatchet striking one of the windows close by my chair, cut short the almost incoherent threats which fell from the man's lips. For one long moment he stood, sweat on his brow, the glitter of madness in his eyes, a helpless, hunted expression upon his malign face, as of one in a terrible torture of doubt and fear which almost paralysed his faculties and would overthrow his reason before it had done with him. Then, anon, as though the crash-

ing blows brought him to action, he turned swiftly, and his trembling fingers were stretched out to take my life, and his, and all that were about that house.

There was a little cupboard upon his right hand, a cupboard resembling nothing so much as a letter-box; and this was now the resting-place for his trembling fingers. Unaware of his purpose (and this a thing beyond all my reckoning), I stood, held to the place by indescribable excitement, while he unlocked the cupboard door and showed me, within it, the brass clasps of an electric switch and the twisted wires which ran from it. In a tremendous revelation, as the truth of death brought to the mind in a flash, I understood the purpose of those wires and what he would do with them. They linked his hand and the mine prepared in the thicket of the wood. As he had promised that his secret should never be known in England, so would he perform. He had but to touch the button of that switch, and the tunnel's mouth would be no more. The victory was his; the victory of the mind over men; of a will indomitable in the one purpose. No one who had dared the thicket where the secret lay would emerge any more to speak of it. And he would live to make it a secret anew; the terror rehabilitated; the peril which carried me to this house and might never carry me from it.

I say that he opened the door of the box, and stood before it with the glitter of madness in his eyes, but odd words of sanity upon his lips. Though

I knew what he would do, though death was at my very elbow, so potent was the spell of amazement and discovery that I stood there, unable to lift a hand or raise a cry or do anything but watch him in dumb despair. When freedom came, when the voices of those without quickened my faculties as they had quickened his, I sprang upon him with all the strength God has given me, and sought to pin him by the throat. But he shook me off with the fury of a madman, and, stumbling in my maldroit attempt, I fell headlong at his feet, and he touched the brass and sparks flashed from the wires.

"To hell together, Alfred Hilliard—to hell together!"

The words rang out as the lingering cry of a man cast from the world suddenly to darkness and to death. Slowly at first, anon with a terrible force which seemed to turn the very brain, the ground began to quake beneath us, to roll and pitch as the waves of the sea. I heard a dull, sustained roaring as of an avalanche falling; the house itself rocked to its foundations; split as a whole thing shattered at its heart; was rent at last from roof to cellar; came down with thunderous crashing of beams and splintering of glass and blinding dust of mortar and of brick. God! did man ever live through such an hour or such a scene? Cast downward, pitched headlong, conscious of no sure foothold, the very floor bending in beneath me, the great beams of the ceiling bursting from their

welts; doors and windows, grate and chimney falling inwards; the awful sounds of rending wood and devastating iron and glass all beat to powder—I say that I heard and saw these things as in some day of God's judgment, of the last hour of my life and the beginning of the mysteries. And I must live that agony out, there was no mercy of it. The beams fell about me, but none would kill me; the darkness was of the grave, impenetrable. A lantern, caught by the brickwork and still burning, shone as some fitful ray in a pit of death. But it gave me light to see Jeffery's face, bloody in suffering and the sweat of death; and I knew that he had paid the price and that his work was done.

And so to the silence, with the crashing sounds afar, and about me the terror of the tomb.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Pit

THE sound in my ears was like that of rushing water, or of the gathering wind surging to a tempest and always waxing louder. I was conscious of life, but had no power to return to life—not so much as to raise my head or lift a hand to help myself. As one in a trance (but the trance which is of the instant of waking), I lay for so long a time that days and nights appeared to pass; the sun to rise and set; the stars to turn about me; the voice of storm to fret and sob and falter. And from this I must have passed to sleep; the sleep of weakness and of Nature at her ebb. For the silence was profound when next I knew that I lived; and I opened my eyes in darkness so unbroken that even the very ground would take no shape.

Looking back to that dismal hour, it is astonishing to me to remember how slowly my mind would gather up the tangled thread of that story, or allow me to remember where I was or why I lay in darkness at all. Remoter events I could recall—the

days with little Agnes at Pau; her coming to Cottesbrook and meeting my mother there; the quarrel at Calais, the boyish anger of it and the heroics which followed after. But the greater matter, the shaft below the sea, the weeks of the doubt at the River Bottom House, the last grim scene with Jeffery, were gone so completely, when first I came to consciousness, that I had not a glimmering of them; and, lacking a starting place, could take no argument to begin or end it. Vague fancies, pitiful fears, hallucinations which had more of logic than the common, followed upon this oblivion. At one time I thought myself to be a dead man seeking the light from the shades. Or, again (and God forbid that I should dilate upon this!), I believed that they had buried me while I lived, and that the darkness about me was the darkness of vault or catacomb. There was a frenzy, a mental madness of this myth, which might well have cost me my reason. I swore that I would fight my way to the light and air above me if I dug the earth with my naked hands. The thought that I had been deserted by all the world, that men trod the grass above my head, that my voice would never be heard though a hundred listened for it, drove me with woeful strength to a mad battle against a rampart of brick and stone and the mould which fell chill and sodden upon my face. But I was bound to the ground as though a chain engirdled my body. All my effort (so much greater, it seemed, than weakness would let it be) would not

raise me, nor free my limbs from the unyielding weight which prisoned them. The very struggle to be free but made the grip the surer. I could not move a hand; scarce had the strength to cry out from the silence of that pit.

Weakness followed upon this endeavour; reason upon my impotence. When, at last, I came to lay quite still, because of the lesson which had been taught me, the events of the day and of the final hour recurred to my mind one by one; and I could start from that last scene of the cataclysm, the falling house, the crashing beams, the splintering glass; and from that (the mind ever working backward) go on to the silent hall, and the jangling bell, and the blows upon the door; and so, quickly, to Lepeletier's death (if, indeed, he were dead), and to the sudden flight of those who worked in the thickets beyond the gardens. Ah, I had it all then, and wanted my story no longer. We had gone down together—the man who wrought and the man who would have destroyed—to this darkness, this pit which France had dugged for us. And of the two, life was for me; for I had seen Jeffery's face when he fell, and I knew that he was dead. Again I said that the judgment of God was thus made manifest. Even there, when a man might not have wished to count the hours he had to live, I could remember that the great conspiracy against my country had thus been avowed; and that, for the day at least, the peril was no more. The gate which her enemies would have opened at Dover

was shut that night. I believed and hoped (as I believe and hope now) that the hour would never come when treachery or folly would open it again.

Remote as a dream of a heaven of stars and wan light of suns beyond them, this abiding justification came to me, but would not rest; for ever recurring was the terror of the darkness, the surpassing dread of the pit which engulfed me. What was happening in the world above, I asked myself; and answered that my friends were there—Harry, perchance, and, it might be, Mallinson—and that if they knew, there would be neither night nor day for them until the work were done. Or, again, how should they know, or why imagine that any man could be swept away in that cataclysm and live when it had passed? They would seek the dead and not the living, I said. All that amazing discovery—the shaft in the thicket, the sensation which the truth must bring, the desire to be sure that the gate was closed against France and her instruments, would prevail above all thought of those who had gone down in the *débâcle* and were already past all help. Vain to hope or think of it, I imagined; for if the thing were known, what labour of loving hands could mend my case or drag me from the place? I would not believe, and, incredulous, went on believing still.

It had been utterly dark when first I opened my eyes, and it was dark still when the sleep of weakness brought me to a calmer mood. Submitting now, perforce, to the inevitable (because of the very pain

which effort cost me), I lay so long a time that imagination counted days and weeks for me; made unbroken nights of darkness and dawn which gave no light, said each minute was an hour, each hour an eternity. For so Time deals with us, as the philosophers have taught; and being of our own creation, can cheat us at his pleasure, and more especially go slow when we cry hasten. As the fact stood, all those days and weeks of mine were but the vigil of a single night, the weary waiting for the dawn, which came at last in a poor ray of misted greyness that turned anon, as to a bird's wing of dusted gold, hovering in the heavy air and tantalising the eyes with its promises. Then, too, at this moment of day, I heard the sound of water dripping, and saw the drops oozing from the bricks of a wall—the morning's jewels of the dew. It was a weird sound, that ceaseless splashing of the drops; and it began to be echoed in my head as a discord which could rack the nerves and repeat a note intolerable. I shut my ears to it vainly, and granted that the ray was a message of good omen. For it showed me that I was in the cellar of the house; and that a great beam, striking athwart a heap of rubble of brick and mortar and stone, pounded almost to dust, had so fended me from the avalanche of crumbling walls and crashing iron that, but for a second beam pinning me to a bed of mould, I might have stood up unhurt and laughed at my predicament. None the less, the mass that held me down gripped more surely than any vice. I was as a man bound to

the ground, unable to move a limb or even turn for ease of it; and so bound must I be until my friends should hear me and answer as they would. How Parson Harry would work, I thought, and old Mallinson, if he were there! I imagined the few words that Mallinson would speak—the sharp, brusque order, the splendid purpose of the man. There would be nothing done without old Mallinson.

The ray of light waxed stronger; the water dripped more abundantly, the day waxed to its zenith, and still I heard no message from the world without. My own voice, raised loud in a cry for help, sounded to me as odd as anything I had heard; such a lame cry, so afraid of it I was—afraid as the rats, whom silence emboldened and the halloa sent pattering again. And what were those above doing that they did not answer me? I railed upon their indifference, their cruelty, their desertion of a comrade. If one of them had been in my place, I would have worked for him until the flesh fell from my fingers. But no one lifted a hand to save me; or, if he did, why did I hear no blow upon the earth, no tramping of feet or spade-thrusts sent well home? Once there was an hour when I abandoned hope utterly; determined that Harry and Mallinson were not there at all, that the house had been surprised by the police; perhaps upon some other errand altogether, by men who knew nothing of its secret and cared less. But this was untenable, and I could reject it even in the pit, and begin again with the picture of Harry in the *débris*, and Mallinson by his

side, and good picks falling, and the earth thrown back, and hope of it—ah ! my God ! as few had hoped.

I should perish, I should be saved, I should die of starvation, should live of friendship. The reckonings that I made would have filled a book. In mines men had lived a week with neither crust nor sip. Ah, said the pessimist, but their limbs were not paralysed. It would take a day to dig me out, the better spirit argued ; but the complaining voice cried, A week will not do it. They are working now, whispered the one fellow ; the other mocked, Silence—silence. Certainly I could not hear them. Not a stone moved in the rubble ; not an ounce of the earth. The rats, more bold, came creeping to my side and crossed my body in their path. I had a thirst beyond bearing, a dull sense of pain which never left me ; but still the good fellow spoke. They are working now, he suggested ; hark to them ! I scarce dared to breathe while I listened for new sounds. It was—it was not ; I heard nothing—heard something ; was afraid to move a limb, even to shut my lips ; put it away from me ; took it back. Merciful God, what torture ! And yet, and yet—there was a sound ; you could hear it as an echo of something that fell and fell again, so remote, so faint, that my own heart's beating was louder still and could silence it. And yet there was a sound.

I clenched my hands on the earth and lay back, eyes closed, ears intent, to listen and be sure. The sound was to be heard no more—would it ever come again ? The day ebbed so swiftly that it would soon

be night again ; and I must live through that—the night of a tomb, of blinding darkness, of the water gurgling and the rats at my feet. I thought then that death was the lot, and wished for death, it may be, as the shorter way, the end of all the questions and all the answers, the one road to my deliverance. And then I heard the iron's voice again—a dull, heavy clanging, a sure blow, many of them, swift and often together. My own cry in answer was lame no longer. Thrice I raised it as they had taught me in the open field, and thrice it was answered in clear blows upon the deadening earth. They heard me at last—at last !

The moment of reaction, they say, is the dangerous moment of a crisis. I had been through so much, imagined so much, suffered so much in that pit, that it may be I leaped from extreme to extreme ; and, hearing the blows upon the earth, said that there was salvation, this the end of it. An hour, a day—what did it matter if old Mallinson were up there and Harry at his side ? No lack of willing hands now, I made sure. Still as a mouse I lay to count the heavy blows ; no music was ever half as sweet ! To-morrow I should be up again, out in the air and the sunshine. I should hear the story of it, should witness, perhaps, some of the excitement of that day of wonder and deliverance. What had England said ? I asked. Had the truth been realized, or but a half of the truth, as was the case in many a secret of the nation's peril ? Were the clap-trap peacemongers, the faint hearts, the “ will-not-sees,”

already coming forward to cry, "There is no warning here. We must trust France; this is not the work of her Government, but of a mad engineer"? I divined, even then, that few of my countrymen would admit the truth, or believe that out there, below the waves of the Channel, the tunnel lies, and that to-morrow may unlock the gate of it. But, credulous or doubting, the work was done. We had barred the road to France. We had barred it with our bodies as we lay there in the pit they had digged; and no hand should ever undo what we had done. I would live henceforth for that.

Old Mallinson was up there, and Harry was with him, and many worked to save me. To my shattered nerve be the charge of the fears which returned again as I heard the falling picks, and began to say they were raised too late. For what, urged the coward's argument, if the earth fall as they dig, and the great beam be loosed, and the pit close in, and there remain a cave of it no more? They would sweat and work in vain, those friends of mine, if that befell. No more Alfred Hilliard to shout up to them, and be answered with eager—ay, with desperate blows. An off-chance I made of it afterwards; but then, when the darkness was coming down, and the water dripped, and the rats pattered across my very limbs—ah, it was so real, so sure, that I waited for it—the oscillating beam, the gliding earth, the mould upon my face, and that last fight for breath which must be an agony. Would Mallinson take account of it; would he re-

member? There was no better brain among all the engineers, and I must trust old Mallinson and pin my faith to him. He would not forget.

Dark fell—that intolerable darkness of the pit which was a weight upon the eyes; and, the shapes about me being hidden from my sight, the dreamer's trouble came back again. I remembered little Agnes first of all, and wondered if she were still at Folkestone, and if they had told her. She would come to the house in that case, and be with those who stood in the gardens above me. I could have wished that they had kept it from her; and yet there was an afterthought that she might be there when they got me out—hers the first face I should see; hers the first hand I should touch. By-and-by the greater questions of our future were debated in desperate deliberation, as though to defy the present and ignore it finally. Had her father's death changed that word of hers? Was the gulf of birth and nation impassable still? Destiny had carried us far apart, but danger bridged the road; and now of the future I foresaw that which had been so great a hope to me—the mistress of Cottesbrook and of my house coming home again, as she had come to my mother's side a few short weeks ago. The willing hands whose labours were music to my ears worked and slaved for that, had they but known it. Ay, they worked for a woman's heart and a man's first hope, to blot out the past, to write a future which should have no word of a nation's quarrel upon its pages. Let it

be no wonder that I listened to them, and could believe that never were hands which worked so slowly. They would be too late now—too late, too late.

Earth rolled in the pit, water gushed out from some hidden pipe and washed my feet, was splashed in muddy drops upon my face. I heard the great beam oscillate and slide, and thought that now it was falling to crush the very heart out of me. But it caught again upon some cranny of the stone, and, moving, did that which I never had been able to do for myself, for it freed the prisoned limbs, and I drew them out of the earth and staggered up, with arm and leg bloodless, pulseless, cold as death, but with a desire of the reaction which could have set me leaping. Ingrate had I not said that those above were working like giants now. The blows fell louder, surer; the earth quaked beneath them; the roof was shattered in morsels which bespattered my face and struck sharp upon my hands; the water gushed in one unbroken torrent. I had not thought of the water before that moment; but now it was all my thought. Was there any drain to carry it off, or would it flood the pit and choke me? Away I went again to imagine old Mallinson's anger if he came too late, Harry's distress, the tale that must be told at Cottesbrook. It would be in one hour or in two, at dawn or sunset—yet it was odd that none answered my impatient cry, if, indeed, they struck downward through the quaking rubble. Always the silence and the blows, always, always. Impatience charged

them at the moment when impatience should be gratified. I saw the thing and would not see it; shut my eyes and opened them. Ah, God, it was true, then! They would save me even yet.

A light struck down through a crevice of the roof and glistened radiantly upon the black pool of the water. I uttered a loud cry, as a child in welcome; and far, so far above it seemed, the answering voice cried back. Oh, who would have dared to believe his ears or to play his part indifferently at such an hour? Was it a voice or sound of the falling stone? Again I listened, again, again. Old Mallinson was there; I would doubt it no longer. My friends had heard me; their hands would touch mine presently. I was sinking down, down in weakness, but they would drag me from the pit—old Mallinson was there.

And the rest is mine, mine of joy as then it was of agony.

CHAPTER XXIX

The New Day Dawning

THEY dragged me from the pit to the garden of the house, and many strange faces peered into mine, and many carried lanterns, and many cried, "Thank God!" I was conscious of a cloudless heaven and a clear world of stars glittering in the darkened vault; of the figures of horsemen moving in the shadows, and the sweet wind of the night blowing freshly upon my face. But, above all, I knew that Harry himself held me in his good arms, and that old Mallinson was at his side, and that I should sink back to the darkness no more. For they had saved me, these friends of mine; and I could neither speak to them nor answer them; but must lie as one helpless in the ecstasy of deliverance and of gratitude.

The air—ah, God! to breathe that again. The voices of men—to hear them! To see the sky above, the trees about me, to know that the night was over and that I had lived through it! What page could tell truly of that? I was saved. Harry held me. Old Mallinson was there, as black as

any sweep, and sweating until his very shirt was limp. There was a gentle wind upon my face, and gentle hands to lift me up, and a bed as soft as down to carry me from the place. Oh, they had thought of everything, those wiseheads. And all the bustle, all the sweating figures, all that forethought and care, they were for me alone, the tribute of brave men to one they loved. I lay back again, and thanked God that friends had been there that night. I knew that there was nothing else to think of; a fretting brain began to rest; there came upon me a delicious drowsiness as of a child's sleep; and yet I did not sleep, but listened to them as I lay.

"Gently, now, gently. Good God! have you no eyes? All hands under and lift when I say 'Three'—the doctor afterwards. You, lumberhead, can't you back the cart—are we going to walk to Dover? Lanterns up, and the others go away. You can come to the Lord Warden to-morrow. Now, gently, and all together."

It was old Mallinson hustling them. Black, begrimed, dirty as he was, his eyes shone like stars and seemed to take in twenty things at once. I could have laughed at the figure he cut. There was never such energy in one man before, and never will be again. The "lumberheads" ran at his words as at the lash of a whip.

"Tell old Mallinson to take it easy," I said to Harry—the first word that came to me since I was out; "there's nothing much the matter, only a few

bruises. I'm glad it's you, Harry; it couldn't have been any one else. Don't let them make a fuss."

Our eyes met, I think, in a glance which said, from the heart of one to the heart of the other, "Thank God!" They had laid me on a mattress then, and the hobbledehoys were about to lift it to a farmer's cart which waited at the garden gate. Harry would not answer me, but began to call for the doctor, who came up on a bicycle almost with the words. I recall his face, his figure, as I saw it that night—the figure of a tall man, with a brusque, imperious manner, but all the skill and the quickness of youth in his method.

"Come, now," he said, as he knelt at my side and many held lanterns for him to see my face, "and where is the pain, Captain?"

"Anywhere—everywhere. I went under with the house, and a beam fell across my right leg and arm. They're not broken, for I can use them. You needn't trouble much, doctor."

He smiled at the volubility of it, and, passing his hand quickly over my body, he touched my right side presently, and I could not hold back a sharp cry.

"Ah," he said, "crushed there, I think. Take off his coat, one of you; we must look at that."

They obeyed him quietly, stripping me until the night wind fell cold on my body as a spray of water. Some one in the crowd said, "Poor fellow!" The doctor's face was pursed up and severe. He

called for water and a towel. I remember that I laughed when I heard him.

"Pour a sup of brandy down his throat, measter," cried a fat man in the crowd, and repeated the exordium at intervals. The rustics gaped with open mouths; old Mallinson was still wiping the sweat from his shining face; Harry anticipated the doctor's every wish with a hand as gentle as a woman's.

"Is there much mischief?" I heard him ask, *sotto voce*.

The doctor answered, "I am not sure."

Mallinson came up to us to steady the lantern which a clumsy yokel swung as a censer. I can recollect cold water upon my side, and a tin cup which some one pressed to my lips. Then I was lifted up, up; the stars began to roll and swim in the heavens above me; I knew that Harry was there, that we were leaving the River Bottom House; and, rocked as in a cradle, I sank to sleep, which was unconsciousness.

* * * * *

The sun struck warm in the room where I awoke—a sun of morning, giving to the white blinds a dazzling radiance, and finding many a path of beams wherein the dust was grain of gold, and odd glories of colour were changing and commingled. I did not know the room—had no recollection of ever entering it; and, content to lie very still (so weak I was), the ornaments of it came to

my knowledge one by one, as a picture from which a cloth is turned. There, to begin with, was a great brass pole with hangings of dimity gay in pink roses; and there an armchair in rep; and there a dressing-table in mahogany; and yonder a wardrobe; and by them a table with a vase of roses and a bowl of fruit. No one seemed to stir in the room. Distantly, from the sea, there floated up an echo of the wind's complaint; the music of waves upon the shingle; even the cry of a ship's man and the shriek of a siren. But I was alone, I said; no one watched me, and so my eyes went roving to the picture again; and anon, they seemed to show me something that I would never have looked for in twenty years—the sweetest figure that God has made, the gentlest hand, the face of my little Agnes, so wan, so wistful, so brave, as it bent over me, and those white fingers touched my own, and hot tears fell fast upon the lips which burned for them. No word was needed, no word of wonder; only the deeper silence of content, the surer message of the heart, which might not speak in that hour of her surrender.

I was there in the room and Agnes was with me. Her lips were close to mine, my hand clung to hers as though nevermore to release it. The miracle had been worked. Out of the place of darkness and of death this vision of light had come to me.

"Oh, God be thanked," I cried at last; "it is little Agnes."

She laid her pretty head close to mine, upon the

pillow, and began to speak in whispers of the wonders that had befallen. I heard her as in an ecstasy; impossible to believe that the dream had so rewarded me.

"Alfred, dearest," she said, "they sent me to you—they wished you——"

"And you, little girl, did you not wish it too?"

A flush of colour gave roses to her cheeks; it went travelling up until it touched her little brown curls; and they, winning gold of the sunshine, seemed as a halo of the purest silk set about her childish face. Thus was my question answered—thus she confessed that which I had waited so many weary months to know and to believe.

"I wished it, yes; I have wished it always. You will not send me away now, dearest?"

I drew the little head down to me, and tried to tell her all that I would have spoken in that hour of the miracle. But the words failed me; I could only say "beloved." And long moments passed, I think, before she spoke again of that amazing circumstance.

"Where am I, Agnes? What is this place?"

"The Lord Warden Hotel at Dover."

"Yes, I remember, Harry spoke of that. And Harry?"

"He has gone to Lady Hilliard—to bring her here to-morrow. The other, the black one, he will return at one o'clock."

"Ah, old Mallinson; what a friend to have! And your father, Agnes?"

"He is here, in the hotel. If he could have left his bed, he would have come to you."

I lay back and thought about it. There was something missing in her news, a piece of the puzzle which a fagged brain could not place. Why had I spoken of her father? I could not remember why; nor, upon the spur of it, recollect anything of the last scene in the garden, when that fine old soldier seemed to lie dead before my very eyes. Ultimately, as in a flash, memory came back; but I scarce dared to speak of it. Good God! what had I said?

"Tell me the truth, dear girl," I said at last. "Is it well with Colonel Lepeletier, or not?"

She sat by my bedside and told me all the story. Our hands were locked together, her parted lips almost touched my ear.

"Jean Boisdeffre saved him," she said simply; "he has always been his faithful servant, and he carried him from the garden on that dreadful day. My father had fainted, but he fell upon his arm, and it closed the wound. Oh, you can believe how thankful I am that he has been the means! They told me that he was dead, and I came to Mr. Fordham and spoke. There was no longer anything to forbid me. I told your friends that you were in the house, and they went there that very night. My father is not angry. He says that I have done well. He would have found a way if it had not been this. You blame him, but you do not know him. He has lived many years since we were at

Pau together, dear Alfred. Let us help him to forget in the years which remain."

I drew her closer to me and kissed her lips.

"It is all a dream, and we awake from it together," I said. "Think of that which it has cost us—the mad ambition of a man, fed upon conceit and hatred, and nursed by those who want a king but have no kingdom. If I blame any one, it is the Ministers of France, not their servants. They had not the courage to say 'No' to the fanatics who would have hounded them on to any madness if the old puppets could be cast down and the new ones set up. There is an honour of nationality and there is a dishonour. The patriot is he who makes his country's honour as his own. Believe me, dearest, I shall find my figure of France always in the heart of the little girl who first taught me that love prevails even above nationality. The rest is of the past—lived, forgotten. If we have suffered, we have won something of suffering, nevertheless—your father his honour; I my country's safety, as I hope and believe; you—ah, what shall I say that you have won, little Agnes?"

"All that a woman holds most dear—the shelter of a brave man's heart."

"But of one who would not touch her birthright therein."

"I shall love France always."

"And I—because it has given me Agnes."

She lay in my arms, this little child of France; and, counting all that it had cost her of hope and

heart and self-reproach and a woman's agony, I said that the victory was won indeed, the night no more, the new day dawning in love and retribution.

CHAPTER XXX

An Editor's Note

ALFRED HILLIARD, with a reticence concerning his private affairs habitual in all soldiers, concludes his story at this point. Of the excitement following upon his convalescence, of the rewards which came to him, of the theories of experts, their incredulity, their ignorance, he wisely says nothing. His work was finished at the River Bottom House. It is for others, for those who guard England's honour jealously, to see that the harvest is gathered elsewhere.

Many questions have been put to the narrator of these events ; many will be put in the days to come. That Agnes Lepeletier spoke the word which sent Mallinson, the engineer, and his friend, Harry Fordham, to the farmhouse, we know by her own confession. But the justification of Colonel Lepeletier is yet to be written. He, as his words bear witness, came to England at the invitation of a Government alarmed at the mad emprise to which

the Nationalists had set their hands. He came, if possible, to turn the men from their purpose, to bring them to prudence and to sanity. Compelled at Calais, by the half-caste's threats, to reject the friendship of Alfred Hilliard, here, in England, fear of that which friends would say, forbade him to open the gate or declare the secret. The rest is a story of a woman's devotion; of the unresting labours of a friend most faithful.

That France attempted to build a tunnel under the Channel to England is no longer denied. That her engineers had been engaged upon the work for many years is equally well known. Her prospects of success, should such an attempt be repeated, are variously esteemed. We have seen that the more daring capitalists and fanatics of Paris, having compelled the French Government to thrust out a tunnel from Calais, sought to open that tunnel here by taking a farmhouse in an Englishman's name. Furthermore, they gave out to the world that the workings in the grounds of the house were the fruit of the owner's desire to build an ornamental lake. The vigilance of one man defeated this great scheme; he shut the gate, as he says, in the face of France. But the tube of steel still lies below the sea. No living man, outside the purlieus of the secret, can say how far that tunnel is carried, or where the last tube of it is riveted. It may come even to Dover's cliffs; it may lie many miles from them. Ex-

cavation at the River Bottom House has shown that the dead man Jeffery carried his shaft upon one side no more than a hundred yards towards the sea; but distance throws no light upon the matter. He had but to cut a gate to that road which France carried over from Escalles. He may have been a boaster, or he may have been upon the very threshold of success when the last great scene was played. And there is no Englishman reading Alfred Hilliard's narrative who will not ask himself if this be the beginning and the end of that surpassing conspiracy. To whom we say, The sentinels of England must answer.

In conclusion—an item. The Captain's many friends will hear with interest that Parson Harry Fordham was busy at Cottesbrook in the winter of the year, and having married Alfred Hilliard, bachelor, and Agnes Lepeletier, spinster, put them in a train for London, whence by easy stages they appear to have come to Abbazia, in Italy, and there to have been met by Oscar Lepeletier himself. Paris already has called that venerable soldier a traitor. He has lost a country, he says, but has found a son.

